

Abstract Paper: Violence of Youth in the occupied Palestinian Territories (2000-2012)

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Summary:

The purpose of this paper is to study the phenomena of violence among the Palestinian youth 15-30 years old in the Occupied Palestinian Territories- OPT. The study will take Gaza Strip as a case to examine the violence among youth aged 15-30 years old. Youth are considered the major segment of the society. They are crucially influential in driving the society in peace or conflict. Youth are the backbone, and the engine for the society change and tools. Youth are very politicized and affiliated with political factional ideologies. The Palestinian youth who need to learn and involve in the culture of peace education and communications. However, youth ignore the concepts and practices of tolerance and reconciliation in the Palestinian Territories and Gaza Strip in particular.

The paper will examine also the efforts and activities delivered by a number of local organisations and international agency to educate youth on dialogue, tolerance and reconciliation at the social and the political levels. The paper will examine the role of youth in disseminating culture of social change in rebuilding mutual trust, reconciliation, building capacities for conflict resistance, empowering marginalized parties and launching joint development policies and strategies. For example, it will discuss the efforts done by March 15 Movement which was inspired by the regional changes. However, the youth movement was also part of a series of peaceful efforts against the Israeli occupation that emerged in different areas of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank during the last few years.

The paper will consider a number of social, economic and political factors, circumstances and changes that have influenced the use of youth for violence in the OPT (2000-2012).

Historical and Political Context:

The historical factor remains a crucial part for many youth in Gaza Strip due to religious and cultural and ideological backgrounds. Therefore, it is important to provide an historical overview of the socio-economic and political history of Gaza, so that the reader can understand the historical context from which youth can get part of their education. The Gaza Strip is a territory on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea that borders Egypt on the southwest (11 km) and Israel on the east and north (51 km (32 mi)). It is 41 kilometres (25 mi) long, and from 6 to 12 kilometres (3.7 to 7.5 mi) wide, with a total area of 365 square kilometres (141 sq mi). The population of Gaza Strip is about 1.7 million people. The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim. With a yearly growth rate of about 3.2%, the Gaza Strip has the 7th highest population growth rate in the world.¹

The social and power structures of Palestinian society were expanded under different non Palestinian rulers during last Century. For example, during Ottoman Empire, and examines the major societal divisions in nineteenth century Palestine (land-owning families, peasants and Bedouin), at the time when Palestinian political identity began forming prior to the British mandate. It also covers the rise of Palestinian national identity in resisting the British Mandate and its administrative system of 1917, as a result of power changes during the First World War. During this period, the Zionist movement used the suffering of Jews in Europe to intensify their immigration to Palestine, until war erupted between Jews and Arabs in 1948. On 15 May 1948, the Jews defeated the Arabs and established their own state over 78 per cent of historical Palestine. The creation of Israel redefined the map of the Middle East, following the forced expulsion by Israel of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and land. These Palestinians became refugees in different places: in the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.

Israeli Occupation

On 7 June 1967, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including Jerusalem, became territory under Israel's occupation. Palestinian national growth had intensified under Israeli occupation by

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaza_Strip

the time the first uprising, or intifada, took place on the eve of 8 December 1987. This popular uprising was an expression of national and political awareness by Palestinians, which aimed at establishing a future 'entity' but without any politically-driven agenda or any single national or Islamic movement leading it. The Palestinian youth were the fuel of this Intifada that continued for 7 years.

The Intifada had an organisational infrastructure based on local, popular committees led by youth. These were coordinated through a 'Unified National Leadership of the Uprising' (UNLU), which in turn coordinated initiatives with the PLO elite based in Tunis. The popular committees led by youth were dedicated not only to organizing actions against Israeli forces, but also to the provision of social welfare and health care, empowering women in particular to participate in economic development, social reconciliation among citizens, and encouraging self-sufficiency at grass-roots levels.² The UNLU organized popular general strike action every ninth day of every month and throw stones at the Israeli soldiers. However, there were Hamas youth groups with ideological Islamic doctrine ran social, political, and religious and resistance activities against the Israeli occupation. Hamas youth groups were educated on ideologies and doctrine of refuting negotiations, and compromises with Israel under any circumstances.

During the first intifada, secret negotiations took place between Israeli and Palestinian representatives convened by the Norwegians. These secret talks were concluded with the Declaration of Principles (Oslo) Agreement between Israel and the PLO signed in Washington on 13 September 1993 to establish a self-rule Palestinian Authority (PA) in Gaza Strip.³ This agreement brought new hopes for both societies. The PA recruited thousands of youths who used to resist the Israeli occupation in the popular intifada to its police and national security forces to protect the peace process. However, this process failed when the PA and Israel failed to reach a political compromise aimed at establishing a viable Palestinian state side by side on July 2000.

Peace Process Failure

² Andrew Rigby (1991): *Living the Intifada*. Zed Books Ltd. London, p23.24

³ Andrew Rigby (2010): *Palestinian Resistance and Non-violence*. PASSIA publications. Jerusalem. P59

Both the Palestinians and the Israelis failed to reach an agreement over the critical issues of the status of Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees. Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem is the most sacred of mosques and considered the second-most holy place for Muslims after Mecca. The visit of the Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon to the Harm Al Shareef mosque, the holy site for Muslims in Jerusalem, on 28 September 2000, caused an eruption of violence which very quickly spread to the Palestinian streets led by youth.⁴ This mosque is considered the second most holy place for Muslims after Mecca. The outbreak of the second Intifada came only two months after the failure of the Camp David negotiations between the PA and Israel. Israel used of excessive violence against unarmed civilian protesters in the holy site. The number of Palestinian youth casualties during the first weeks of the uprising was significantly high. In the second uprising that continued from 2000 to 2005, the Palestinians and the major segments were youth who were living through extremely harsh conditions and had lost their human security at all levels: political, economic, health, personal, food, community and environmental.

Social and Economic Context:

The Palestinians of the Gaza Strip suffered lack of electricity, shortage of clean water, a high level of unemployment and the overwhelming majority of the population living below the poverty line, increased possession of weapons among youths, overcrowded schools, impoverished infrastructure, and no access to the world since Israel controlled the borders. As a part of these human insecurities, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was too weak among other factions to function properly. The PA was unable to survive without the external donations and humanitarian assistance, and could not deliver proper public services to Palestinians whilst it was coming under Israeli military attack. This allowed for non-state groups, such as the Islamic movement Hamas, to fill the gap to some extent, to recruit thousands of youth using religious and educational doctrines, principles and little of financial and social support. During this period when there was an absence of human security at all levels, the Israeli occupation forces implemented the disengagement plan on 12 September 2005, by withdrawing soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip without any agreement with the PA.⁵

⁴ Andrew Rigby (2010): *Palestinian Resistance and Non-violence*. PASSIA publications. Jerusalem. p63

⁵ Sarah Roy (2011): *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector*. Princeton University Press, p. 191–207

One change that occurred after the Israeli disengagement was the decision by Hamas to participate in the electoral process. Hamas won the Palestinian national elections of 2006, and thus composed the vast majority of the Palestinian parliament in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank on 20 January of that year. In 2006, the lives of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip deteriorated drastically after Hamas won the Palestinian elections. The newly elected government had to liaise with Israel in order to ensure the basic needs of the Palestinian people were met – the daily flow of electricity, food, water and health supplies – and this required direct coordination with Israeli military command. Hamas does not recognize Israel or the previous agreements signed with Israel by the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the PA. Israel immediately rejected Hamas's government unless it would recognize Israel and the previous agreement, including renouncing violence.

As a result of the complete borders closure by Israel, the Hamas government was also faced with the extreme suffering of the people of Gaza. Israel declared the Gaza Strip to be an enemy entity, and Hamas found itself isolated in a closed Gaza that was completely dependent on international assistance. Hamas saw that the Israeli siege had contributed to the closure of about eighty-five per cent of the workshops and factories in Gaza, leaving 70,000 young employees jobless.⁶ The economic situation of the Gaza Strip remained extremely low whilst Israel maintained the closure of all border passages, and Egypt closed its only border passage with Gaza. In order to find a solution to this isolation and the impact it was having on economic conditions in Gaza, Hamas assisted in the digging of dozens of illegal tunnels between the Gaza and Egyptian borders, which were managed and licensed by the Hamas government. The tunnels increased in number from twenty-four to more than 500; these were used for many purposes including channelling fuel, goods and weapons.⁷

There were more than 10000 unemployed youth turned to work in digging the tunnels and smuggling the commodities to survive with their families. These hard economic, social and political circumstances turned Gaza Strip into a barrel of boiling fuel. The majority of population represented by youth were trapped between the Islamist Hamas and Fatah secularist movement.

⁶ Al Hayyat, 26 August 2007

⁷ Mohsen M. Saleh (Ed. 2010): The Palestinian Strategic Report 2008. Alzytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations. Beirut

Hamas' Violent Takeover

On 7 June 2007, Hamas' youth used violence and military action against the security forces of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in order to control the administration of security throughout the Gaza Strip. The PA security forces were managed and controlled entirely by Fatah.⁸ On 14 June 2007, Hamas military forces defeated the PA forces, leaving Hamas in full control of the Gaza Strip, along with 161 casualties (forty-five civilian, ninety-one Fatah, and twenty-seven Hamas) according to a Gaza-based Palestinian human rights group.⁹

The military actions further exacerbated society's wounds and badly affected Palestinian national interests that were already suffering under the Israeli occupation. The takeover also contributed to divisions within the social structure of some small and extended families whose members belonged to both Hamas and Fatah. The division deepened the Palestinian wounds and human insecurities at all levels in the Palestinian occupied territories and the Gaza Strip in particular. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank were now without a joint authority able to resolve issues relating to borders, movement, fuel, energy, electricity and raw materials.¹⁰

Hamas succeeded in defeating the PA forces and in h the Gaza Strip. However, a security threat to its governance still existed in the guise of a number of strong clans and Fatah military groups. Hamas decided to implement a series of measures against different Fatah groups. These groups were Fatah youth military groups. It killed some, arresting others and confiscating their weapons.¹¹ These actions deepened the worries and desperation among youth groups at different levels.

On 25 July 2008, the stability in Gaza maintained by Hamas' security was interrupted when a car full of Hamas activists exploded in an incident which became known locally as 'the beach accident'.¹² This led to a new state of tension, when Hamas accused Fatah of engineering the

⁸ Jonathan Schanzer (2008): *Hamas Vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine*. Palgrave and Macmillan. New York. P 107

⁹ The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. Gaza. June 17, 2007

¹⁰ Jonathan Schanzer (2008): *Hamas Vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine*. Palgrave and Macmillan. New York. P 107-19

¹¹ Mohsen M. Saleh (Ed. 2010): *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2008*. Alzytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations. Beirut

P.43-47

¹² Khaled Amayreh: *Bloody-minded Narrowness*. Al-Ahram Weekly. Issue No. 909. August, 7 – 13, 2008.

incident in order to disturb Hamas' governance in the Gaza Strip. In response, Hamas then launched a security and military campaign against the leaders and members of Fatah. Hamas arrested more than 400 youth of Fatah and closed down more than 120 civil society organisations (CSOs) in response to the 'beach accident'. Hamas also shut down the only radio station which still maintained its opposition to Hamas following its military takeover of the Gaza Strip; this station was the only voice still critical of Hamas policies and it was managed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Hamas prevented the major Palestinian newspapers, Al-Ayyam, Hayyat and Al-Quds, from being distributed in the Gaza Strip; just as the PA prevented Hamas newspapers from distribution within the West Bank.¹³

These changes on the ground created a state of frustration and worries among youth groups. Youth were unable to express themselves freely. Their civil society organisations were always under security and administrative supervision. “Many youth thought of immigration if they had the opportunity to do so” said: Sohail Asad, Palestinian youth, 28 years old.¹⁴ Moreover, the political, economic, health, personal, food, community and environmental insecurity of the people of the Gaza Strip had worsened acutely, and life had become impossible for Palestinians there as a result of Israel’s Operation Cast Lead waged from 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009.

Israeli Military Operations on Gaza

Israeli military operations left more than 1,300 people dead and over 5,000 wounded and 2,400 buildings were destroyed. The operation increased the suffering of the Gazan population for years to come. Many wounded and sick were trapped in their homes, unable to get medical care. Corpses were left among rubble and in destroyed homes because Israeli forces denied access to medical crews during the campaign. The war increased the numbers who were displaced or trapped in their homes. Gaza’s civilians faced dire shortages of food, water, cooking gas, fuel and medical care due to insecurities, the enforced closure of all of Gaza’s borders, and alleged serious violations of international humanitarian law. Electricity was sharply down, and in some

¹³Mohsen M. Saleh (Ed. 2010): *The Palestinian Strategic Report 2008*. Alzytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations. Beirut

P.65-66

¹⁴ Interview, February 28, 2013

places sewage was spilling into the streets. Children and youth make up 56 per cent of Gaza's residents, were especially vulnerable (Levy 2010: introduction).

These long and complicated situations left the Palestinian youth in a very political controversial stage and witnessing a turning point in their history due to bloody division between Gaza Strip and the West Bank in addition to the deadlock in peace process and mistrust between Israel and Palestine in the Middle East. It was far reaching a strategic peaceful based on tolerance, dialogue and internal reconciliation. There was very little cooperation between the civil society organisations to educate the Palestinian youths on peace building. The Palestinian youth ignore the impact of tolerance and reconciliation education on development and change process as well. There was very minimum level of peace education, communication and information dissemination in this sense within the proposed areas of operations. Therefore, pressures had already definitely hindered peace process stability, judicial, political and economic reforms for which the Palestinian people have been waiting for a long time.

An inevitable disaster on the Palestinian social structure and its national project for statehood stability and peace if there is no a peaceful initiative and public pressure at all levels. An initiative for calling up for changing the situations and ending up Palestinian division and the culture of violence would be essential and urgent to influence the reforms and get youth involved in political and social change at large. In the light of the "Arab Spring", the youth in occupied Palestinian Territories were worried about their future because of the deadlock in the political and social development process, the absence of peace and Palestinian division after the rapid changes.

However, there were tens of national civil society organisations and international agencies that implemented hundreds of youth projects and invested on them educationally and vocationally to change their attitudes and behaviours. The late change in the region motivated and united those youth forces from civil society organisations, student unions and small political parties to end the division in Palestine between Hamas and Fatah.

Youth Non-violent Movement

On 15 March 2011, social and youth groups organised massive peaceful marches and non-violent protests to make a stand against the division and conflict between Hamas and Fatah in the Gaza

Strip and the West Bank.¹⁵ Those groups were known as the March 15 Movement, which employed different tools of modern social media networks to organise the protests. These protests were the first well-organised marches in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank since 2007. The Youth March 15 Movement posed a real challenge for Hamas and Fatah, and could become a similar phenomenon to the Egyptian youth revolution, as the organisers intended. The Movement forced the Prime Minister of Hamas, Ismail Hania, to invite the Palestinian President, Mahmud Abbas to visit Gaza, and he responded positively to the call.¹⁶ This rapid and positive response was an attempt from Hamas and Fatah to take into account the peaceful youth protests and their efforts to unify Palestinian society. Hamas and Fatah also wanted to avoid more protests and campaigns in the near future.

It was clear that the March 15 Movement was inspired by the regional changes. However, the youth movement was also part of a series of peaceful efforts against the Israeli occupation that emerged in different areas of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank during the last few years. Many members of the March 15 Movement had already learned the lessons of Gandhi and Martin Luther King in using non-violent resistance, and they continued their efforts against the Israeli wall in the West Bank, as well as against the security fence in the Gaza Strip. The 15 March Movement was a brave initiative and a step forward, but the Movement found it difficult to continue its efforts to force Fatah and Hamas towards unity or reconciliation, without external intervention or regional changes in Egypt and Syria. It is also too early to say whether the Youth March 15 Movement in Palestine could bring about genuine change similar to that in Tunisia or Egypt; there are many differences between Palestine and other Arab countries, from social to politics to culture. More importantly, those countries have experienced peace and stability for more than thirty years at least, unlike Palestine. The reasons, circumstances and factors for this are many, and I summarise them as follows:

1. Palestinians have been living under Israeli occupation and violence for more than forty-four years; there has been no peace and development in Palestine.
2. Palestinians have been divided between Hamas and Fatah since 1987. The Palestinian people have never had a representative leadership for all Palestinians in order to consider a strategic plan for peace or war, even though the PLO has been the legal body and

¹⁵ Maan, Ramallah, March 15, 2011. <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=368811>

¹⁶ Haaretz. Tel vive. March 15, 2011

Palestinian representative for more than four decades. Hamas has disputed and refused the representation of PLO, as the latter was unelected.

3. Palestinian political factions were fragmented and loyal to two different Arab camps. Hamas was loyal and linked to Syria, and Fatah was loyal and linked to the former Egyptian regime.
4. The Palestinian people have been fragmented and distributed between the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Jerusalem, without any geographical unity, on the one hand, and between the different communities of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Gulf and elsewhere in the Diaspora on the other hand.
5. The Palestinian youth witnessed two long, popular and violent uprisings from 1987 to 1993 and from 2000 to 2005).¹⁷
6. Palestinians suffered international sanctions after Hamas composed the Palestinian government in 2006, which caused a number of humanitarian problems.
7. Palestinian youth witnessed the collapse of the peace process between Israel and PLO under the Israeli expansionist settlement policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.
8. Hamas' military takeover of Gaza and the expulsion of the PA's forces in 2007, when about 700 young Palestinians were killed and injured deepened the wounds and social fragmentations among families.¹⁸
9. The Israeli Military Cast Lead Operation in the Gaza Strip destroyed the poor infrastructure and further deepened the wounds of Palestinians; it left more than 1,300 dead, over 5,000 wounded and 2,400 buildings destroyed.¹⁹
10. There have been about 5,935 Palestinian prisoners behind Israeli bars for many years.²⁰ Those prisoners represent different and important segments of society. Since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967, over 650,000 Palestinians have been detained by Israel. This forms approximately 20% of the total

¹⁷Andrew Rigby (2010): *Palestinian Resistance and Non-violence*. PASSIA publications. Jerusalem P. 51-63

¹⁸ The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. Gaza

¹⁹ Gideon Levy (2010): *The punishment of Gaza*. Verso. London p.78

²⁰ Addameer Prisoners' Support and Human Rights Association. January 1, 2011
<http://www.ifamericansknew.org/stats/prisoners.html>

Palestinian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in accordance with the Addameer Prisoners' Support and Human Rights Association as of 1 January 2011.

These serious setbacks caused mainly by continued occupation and partly by the absence of a Palestinian collective leadership and the absence of a collective strategy and common policies during the last three decades, made Palestinian society and youth in particular much more tired, frustrated and desperate. The regimes of Hamas and Fatah easily controlled the youth movement in different ways. However, peaceful youth revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East that ousted the dictators of Egypt and Tunisia brought new hope and optimism for Palestinian society that time.

Way Forward

The Palestinians have witnessed unprecedented state of political deadlock. In specific, the Palestinian division, Israeli military attacks on Gaza Strip and the Israeli settlement policy complicated the situations of youth and their future. Therefore, urgent needs for well-designed actions must be taken to promote culture of violence, increase education of peace building by enhancing youth involvement in peaceful and development actions. The youth lack culture of peace, tolerance and reconciliation at all levels. Youth ignore the impact of tolerance and reconciliation on development and change process. To doing so, youth 15-30 years old and their CBOs are considered the backbone of society to be educated on reconciliation and tolerance.

In specific, civil society organisations have to promote non-violent actions to create a culture of peace-building through strengthening the role of youth and their CBOs as a solid basis of Network in Gaza Strip by undertaking peace-building campaigns such as material production, dialogue, peaceful marches, summer camps, Radio programs, hall town meetings and other community initiatives. Civil Society organisations and the Palestinian Authority have to work together in a national coalition for peace education. Media agencies should provide some young trainees to participate in the training. This will promote society's values of respecting and promoting peaceful participation as a condition for a democratic process. It should also entail that the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable are heard in the decision-making process based on ending the occupation and public freedoms. The national dialogue will help establish

trust between interlocutors and joint cooperation in order to influence the policy level and its procedures.

These efforts will contribute to broaden the base of support for the Middle East Peace Process through the promotion of communication and understanding and by showing the advantages of working for mutual benefit with tangible results together. Youth from both sides are the backbone, and the engine for the society change and tools. For example, according to my own observation and filed survey and serious consultations with many youth groups who proposed those ideas have been designed to promote youth culture of non-violence and resisting conflict. These actions will help youth to practice their newly acquired peaceful skills and knowledge through forming advocacy groups calling for positive change based on non-violence and accepting the others, media broadcasts and producing materials and enabling them to communicate with other regional cultures and civilisations.

On other words, it is a need for civil society organizations to strengthen partnership and collective work among CBOs and youth to promote the culture of peace cross borders. Youth represents a decisive portion of population and a powerful contributor to whether as a negative or positive impact on change and community development process. Therefore, empowering youth involvement and their CBOs in peace-building actions give a different transitional point in increasing this culture and practice as well. Educating youth on the principles, tools and strategies of peace building and non-violence concepts and practices based on “mutual understanding and advance peace process towards lasting regional peace will contribute to a great extent in social change and empowering stability in the Palestinian society.

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