

Middle East

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# The Intifadas and the Palestinian Youth

The latest Intifada has once again brought to the fore all the national themes of resistance inherited from the first Intifada. The same songs, the same poems and the same symbols are used. The Palestinian television constantly mingles images of the first Intifada with those of the present uprising. Unlike the first Intifada, however, there is no massive commitment on behalf of the youth to the cause of the Intifada Al Aqsa. The following is concerned with how the attitude of the young Palestinians towards the national struggle has evolved, which could explain the difference in their level of commitment to the two uprisings.

The young stone-throwers are but a minority, most of them coming from the more disadvantaged sections of the refugee camps. As for the groups fighting Israeli strong-points, the majority come from youth movements linked with Palestinian parties, and mobilize a different kind of population: namely people who were often more specifically affected by the first Intifada. Still, in that case as well, we cannot say that there is a massive commitment.

The main difference now is that most youngsters do not believe that the fight will succeed in the short term, although they think that it is a necessity. They adhere to the nationalist themes which are leading the present fight, because they think that the construction of an independent state is the only way to obtain their rights and enable the expression of Palestinian identity. Most of them no longer believe in the possibility of making this state come true through short-term confrontation, which is precisely the contrary of what the youth of the first Intifada thought. Palestinians are thus trapped by the contradiction between their support for the principle of a fight for independence and their scepticism as regards how effective such an uprising is.

► **Crossroad  
'City Inn' at  
El Bireh (suburb  
of Ramallah)**

## From national hope to individualism

The evolution in their way of thinking stems from the extreme disappointment which has grown among the youth from 1995 onwards, on account of the gap between what they fought for and the reality of the current Palestinian Authority. At the same time, opposition parties were not believed to have any constructive suggestions for an alternative. Islamist parties alone were able to take advantage of the situation. For all the (relative) scepticism which prevailed regarding their strategy of confrontation, they alone were thought to be taking up the gauntlet and defending Palestine's 'lost honour', when they decided to continue the national struggle after the failure of the Intifada. Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, being interpreted as Hizbullah's own victory, gave credibility to that feeling.

That analysis of the political situation led a large part of the youth to bitterness and despair since they could not see any way out of an extremely difficult situation, unstable and dangerous, with an economy in ruins. They have tried to reconstruct their lives by drastically lowering their hopes and concentrating on projects which they could control and which would never be jeopardized by an unstable and economically degraded situation. This self-restructuring corresponds to a will to find a field in which it is possible to act without systematically being alienated by an oppressive situation. So, projects like beginning a family, studying abroad if possible, or finding a job, have become solutions. To a certain extent, these are attempts to forget a political situation that is increasingly restricting their horizons with each day that goes by. This refocusing is therefore made most of the time with a

certain degree of bitterness and appears more as a last resort than as a real alternative, because it is built on failure and not on a real sense of fulfilment. In short, the attempt to reconstruct a small but independent life for oneself is in contradiction with the Intifada Al Aqsa.

This self-restructuring is challenged by the present mobilization of nationalist themes as the unique meaning of the Intifada Al Aqsa. In fact, bringing again to the fore the nationalist themes, coupled with the acceptance by some of the youth to sacrifice their very lives for these principles strongly discredits all attempts to initiate projects which are not linked with the national struggle. Anyhow, the serious degradation of the political and economic situation has reduced their scope for these projects. For the most disadvantaged Palestinians, such projects as finding employment or marriage are impossible, simply out of reach.

Sacrificing oneself to the cause of the present Intifada is mostly the choice of youngsters from the latter category. This logic of self-sacrifice makes it possible to solve the contradiction between adherence to the goal of creating a State and scepticism about the possibility of achieving that goal in the short term.

## The use of martyrdom

The *shahid* (martyr) actually produces two about-turns. On the one hand, the *shahid* removes the national struggle from a short-term temporal frame and places it in a thousand-year-old frame. This change in temporality enables a change in status, from that of victim to that of fighter of a victorious struggle, the Jihad, for which Israel is just a passing event. The second about-turn is at the personal level. A youth who accepts the perspective of personal sacrifice is then able to remove from his shoulders the burden of

conflict between adherence to nationalism and self-fulfilment since he transcends his own story by associating it to the victorious figure of the *shahid*: my self-fulfilment will come from the national struggle which for sure has little chance of succeeding now, but it does not matter since I am ready to sacrifice myself for a goal which is above and beyond me.

Such a commitment that enables them to be involved in the logic of victory and no longer in the logic of failure requires sacrificing their history as an individual. This choice made by a small minority of Palestinian youths invalidates any attempts at self-fulfilment through personal projects which would mean abandoning the fight for the superior objective of the national struggle. This is why the decision to resume the fight and accept the sacrifice made by a very small minority of the youths is going to reduce the identity resources available. The Palestinian field of identity resources is to become more and more univocal. Nationalism tends to become both the sole way of interpreting reality and the framework within which actions must take place in order to be socially legitimate.

This resumption of the fight will not change the way the majority of the youths view the possibilities of change. We can witness a cleavage between, on the one hand, talk of unconditional backing for the struggle, and on the other hand, a real commitment. They do in fact think that the fight must continue because the situation is unacceptable. They have waited long enough and heard enough promises, which were never kept. They also have the feeling that if they stop now, they will lose everything. But if they support the objectives of the fight, they do not believe that throwing stones or even shooting is effective. A growing feeling is that martyrs have died for nothing. At

the most, only the attacks would seem to them to be able to establish a real power relationship. So the Palestinian youths who are not getting involved in a logic of sacrifice are caught between a nationalist ideology which they stand for and which is becoming the only source of legitimacy, and their refusal to get involved in a fight which is extremely costly in terms of lives and which makes already hard living conditions even harder. That is why they are searching for alternative ways of keeping up the fight such as boycotting Israeli products or making international opinion aware through means of the internet.

Still, that does not seem enough to them, and this despair leads to the idea that either they do not have competent leaders to guide them to more efficient ways of resisting, or that they are in a total deadlock because of Israeli intransigence. That general feeling of an impasse makes a large number of these youths think about going abroad, especially those who can afford it. It seems to them one of the last few possibilities that remain, in order to lead a normal life and to find more acceptable living conditions – in short, become the actors of their own story.

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