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Insulated eruptions of discontent: Palestinian protests in the absence of trusted organisations

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that the so-called 'intifada of knives' in 2015–2016 was not a new phenomenon in the Palestinian resistance. Instead, it paralleled the situation in Gaza in the mid-1980s when Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) members engaged in similar attacks. What both periods share is the absence of efficient organisational vehicles facilitating a more durable form of collective resistance. This was the case in the mid-1980s because PIJ was yet to develop the effective organisational structures required to facilitate the resistance its members desired, and this was also the case in 2015–2016 because Palestinian youth are largely disillusioned with Palestinian political factions and traditional party politics as arenas to implement change. As these and similar outbursts of violence offer few, or no, principles for political organising for those who follow, what marked the wave of stabbings in the mid-2010s was not the fury with which they were carried out, but rather the rapidity of their collapse. I thus argue that certain organisational principles are required to sustain and prolong any popular protests for a sufficient period.

KEYWORDS

Intifada of knives; Palestinian Islamic Jihad; political organising; collectivism; political disengagement; protest movements

Why did so many Palestinian teens and young adults engage in a series of individual stabbings against Israeli soldiers and settlers in 2015–2016? Many explain these attacks as a new development fuelled by the decades-long frustrations and grievances of the Palestinians. Yet, because these grievances are a constant, it cannot explain the specific expression and form of these eruptions of protest. I argue that the stabbings in 2015–2016 reflect the absence of strong Palestinian organisational vehicles (associations, movements, institutions, committees, unions, etc.) capable of facilitating a more efficient and durable form of collective Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation. The expression and form of the violence in the mid-2010s – individual, spontaneous, and, on the face of it, poorly planned – is caused by the unending frustrations with occupation combined with young Palestinians' eroding trust in traditional Palestinian political parties and factions. Few structures exist to facilitate, channel, and organise their frustration. This is particularly the case in the West Bank, where the Palestinian National Authority (PA) not only suffers from corruption, clientelism, gerontocracy and patriarchal structures neglecting the promotion of its young guard, but where it also clamps down on any form of organised resistance against the Israeli occupation (see e.g., Høigilt 2016a, Tuastad 2017a, El Kurd 2019, Dana 2020).

By comparing the recent wave of violence with the Gaza Strip in the mid-1980s, I argue that these stabbings parallel the situation when members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) engaged in similar actions against Israeli targets. As PIJ only developed streamlined and formalised organisational structures in 1992 (Skare 2021), the situations in the mid-1980s and mid-2010s are similar because PIJ

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struggled to facilitate the resistance of its members in an organised and effective manner. In other words, if members of PIJ wanted to participate in the armed struggle in the mid-1980s, they had to do so by procuring arms on their own initiative, with their own savings, and carry out the attack with little or no organisational assistance. Although its members adhered to the ideology and goals of PIJ, the movement was largely incapable of channelling their discontent in a co-ordinated manner, which in effect led to the same types of attacks as those carried out in 2015–2016. Whereas other scholars have already analysed the wave of violence as an internal Palestinian 'clash of generations' led by Palestine's lost post-Oslo generation (see e.g., Tuastad 2017b), this re-framing is empirically relevant as it questions the uniqueness of recent developments in the history of Palestinian resistance.

I employ the two cases to discuss the conditions for certain types of resistance and the implication for their future success, and postulate that these and similar outbursts of violence offer few, or no, principles for political organisation for those who follow, nor are they intended to. Instead, they resemble Benjamin's concept of law-destroying 'divine violence', which emanates from suppressed suffering without serving any strategic goal (Benjamin 1996, pp. 249–250); or Gurr's definition of the 'riot' (2011, p. 11) with its relative spontaneous and unorganised political violence. What marks the wave of stabbings is, then, not the fury with which they are carried out, but rather the rapidity of their collapse, as these eruptions struggle to maintain momentum. The article thus contributes to the discussion on the inherent difficulties leaderless movements and spontaneous protests face due to their mode of organising (see e.g. Dean 2016, Tufekci 2017, Batmanghelichi 2021).

This is not to suggest that Palestinian mass protests cannot, or will not, erupt. Nor do I suggest that the required organising principles must be in place before mass protests can occur. Rather, I argue that certain organisational principles are required to sustain and prolong any popular protests for a sufficient period as 'without leadership, institutions, and collective purpose, it is difficult for a movement to act logically and consistently towards a collective objective' (Pearlman 2011, p. 12).

This article proceeds as follows. I first analyse the wave of violence in 2015 and 2016 as a symptom of the absence of any perceived feasible Palestinian political vehicle to organise discontented Palestinian youth. I then show that this wave is a reoccurrence of past Palestinian experiences of resistance, as several activists in the Gaza Strip carried out stabbings in the mid-1980s in the absence of viable organisational alternatives. I conclude by discussing the differences between the experiences of the mid-1980s and the mid-2010s, and their implications for future Palestinian protests.

Eruptions of discontent in the absence of trust in traditional political structures (2015–2016)

A wave of violence erupted in the West Bank in October 2015 as several Palestinians began stabbing Israeli occupation soldiers and settlers. Mainly young Palestinians in their late teens or early twenties, the assailants were often killed seconds after pulling their knives. Erupting violently and spreading rapidly, the wave received international media attention, and commentators soon predicted the commencement of the third intifada – with some even terming the trend a 'stabbing intifada' (Pfeffer 2015). As the assailants' chance of survival was far lower than the chance of inflicting any significant harm, both Palestinians and Israelis were befuddled when the attacks continued (Chorev 2019, p. 1284).

Observers attempted to elucidate the cause of these stabbings with more or less clarity and nuance. Jeffrey Goldberg, editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic*, employed a Huntingtonian framework when postulating:

> One of the tragedies of the [Israeli] settlement movement is that it obscures what might be the actual root cause of the Middle East conflict: the unwillingness of many Muslim Palestinians to accept the notion that Jews are people who are indigenous to the land Palestinians believe to be exclusively their own […]. (2015)

He thus implied that the Palestinian stabbers were simply paranoid and supremacist. This was similarly not an intifada for Bernard-Henri Lévy (2015) but bore for him instead resemblance to the campaign of the Islamic State (IS) and 'the latest instalment of a worldwide jihad of which Israel is just one of the stages'. Peter Beaumont of *The Guardian*, on the other hand, related the violence to the mounting Palestinian frustrations with an occupation that has continued instead of abated, and with efforts towards statehood 'at a standstill' (2015). Last, some pointed to the role of social media (e.g. Wedeman 2015), stating that many of the attackers were inspired by what they saw on Facebook and Twitter in a situation of developing Israeli-Palestinian tensions: 'What causes attacks today is incitement on Facebook – not mosque leaflets' (Zitun 2016).

The wave of violence has also been employed as a case to study specific issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the portrayal of Israeli and Palestinian identities in social media (Deegan, *et al*. 2018); the potential for mitigating violent conflict escalation (Ditlmann *et al*. 2017); the impact of identity formations for violent retaliation (Fredman *et al*. 2017); or the role of social media and its impact on the characteristics and structure of this wave (Chorev 2019). Yet others analyse the eruption of violence as the natural result of the endless frustrations and grievances caused by Israeli occupation (Høigilt 2016b) combined with the rise of a lost Palestinian generation created by weakened parental and national authority (Tuastad 2017b).

It is, however, unclear why these frustrations should lead to so-called 'lone-wolf attacks' in general and individual stabbings specifically, instead of Palestinian collective action as witnessed in the past. If there is anything persistent about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is the historical grievances of the Palestinian population. Palestinian frustrations, in other words, are a constant, and it is unlikely that they alone can explain the specific *form* of these violent eruptions.

When explaining why a segment of Palestinian youths chose to go the course alone with a kitchen knife, it is difficult to ignore their lack of faith in the Palestinian factions and in the feasibility of traditional political organising. Little love seems to be lost between the traditional factions and young Palestinians, as the latter have largely withdrawn from traditional political activism. The causes for this withdrawal include the restrictions imposed by the Palestinian security services; the limited opportunities afforded to Palestinian youth in the municipalities and in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC); their perception of organised activities being a formality rather than a serious endeavour; and that any peace-related activity or initiative was 'doomed to fail' (Interpeace and Mustakbalna 2017, p. 30). Further, being treated negatively as members of the Palestinian factions, Palestinian youth perceive that they will be dealt with as mere tools by national leaders to reach the goals of their respective faction. 'This stands in stark contrast with the past, when [the factions] used to invest in youth and their aspirations, educate them and encourage them to voluntarily and actively join the political movement' (ibid.).

A significant number of Palestinian youths have consequently become increasingly disillusioned; and nearly seventy percent of young Palestinians defined themselves as 'politically inactive' or 'nearly politically inactive' (Sharek Youth Forum 2009, p. 19). Their disengagement from Palestinian party politics is in part related to the mistrust in the factions and their ability to reach a durable solution to the impasse. Others felt unable to change 'the nature of Palestinian factions, or to support and realize their needs and interests' (ibid., p. 20). Fear was as important as disillusionment: 'We can't participate freely; the parties don't accept contradicting opinions; if you want to express yourself freely, you may be in danger, you might get hurt' (quoted in: ibid., p. 21). Similarly, only eight percent of Palestinian youth were reported to have 'a great deal or quite a lot confidence' in Palestinian political parties in 2016 (Christophersen 2016), and while 'the Occupied Territories have historically had a high degree of youth participation', young people now opt out, leading to an 'exodus from politics' (Høigilt 2016a).

This disengagement from, and de-identification with, the Palestinian factions is also reflected in another section of the youth population. Hilal, for example, describes how the proliferation of NGOs in the Occupied Territories with the corresponding dependence on international aid have 'enhanced an ethos of individualism and a consumerist lifestyle' among the Palestinian middle class – with little

desire for collective action as it may jeopardise sources of livelihood and privileges (2015, pp. 357–358). The Palestinian student population, on the other hand, has 'largely adopted neoliberal references in their conceptualization and justification of both economic and political activities' – and attempting to strike a balance between the expectations of revolutionary discourse and the desire for having a good life, 'this often resulted in a focus on short-term happiness over long-term strategies' (Casati 2016, 532).

This withdrawal is nevertheless ambiguous. While Palestinian students' 'boredom with politics' is an expression of cynicism and frustration with its inefficiency, they only reject a 'specific subset of politics, namely the internal workings of the [Palestinian] party-political system'. Traditional Palestinian party politics has thus turned into a dirty word due to its perceived opposition to the Palestinian liberation struggle – and the cynicism reflects the abandonment of 'traditional sites of Palestinian political participation' rather than a weakening of Palestinian nationalist sentiments (ibid., pp. 524–526).

These testimonies matter because they largely correspond with what we know about the political beliefs of the Palestinian stabbers in 2015–2016. Umar al-Rimawi, for example, who killed one Israeli and injured another at a shopping centre in January 2016, disregarded the traditional Palestinian political movements, while having a deep commitment to the Palestinian cause. Similarly, Fouad Abu Rajab, who was killed after attacking an Israeli police officer, was politically unaffiliated and he shunned the PA (Chorev 2019, p. 1295), and Hamza Matrouk 'wasn't affiliated with any political or religious organization' (Shaalan 2015). The same appears to be the case for Palestinian women, such as the sixteen-year-olds Bian Asila, Lama al-Bakhri, or Hadil Awad – with few, or no, indications of factional involvement or support (Gross 2015, Pileggi 2015, TOI Staff 2015). Indeed, the exception to the rule appears to be the 'staunch Hamas supporter' Abdel Rahman al-Shaludi, who rammed his car into a group of pedestrians in Jerusalem in October 2014 (Winer 2014).

As the average Palestinian stabber shunned party politics while believing strongly in the Palestinian cause, (s)he illustrates the aforementioned withdrawal from traditional sites of political participation – or, in this case, the traditional sites of armed resistance. Indeed, of the 6,500 Palestinians who were arrested for so-called 'hostile activity against Israel' in 2016, fourteen percent of the arrested did not identify with any of the Palestinian factions; and more than half of these 'unaffiliated prisoners' were arrested during the wave of protests commencing in October 2015 – thus emphasising 'the politically independent nature of the incidents' (Chorev 2019, p. 1287). It makes sense, then, that none of the Palestinian factions took responsibility for any of the stabbings, although encouraging events outside of their control in order to capitalise on the situation.

Eruptions of discontent in the absence of effective organisational structures (1985–1987)

While existing research has strictly framed the eruption of violence commencing in 2015 as a reflection of contemporary grievances, this section demonstrates that it bears similarities to the Gaza Strip in the mid-1980s – a period when there were few effective organisational vehicles to channel the increasing belief in direct action against occupation. This absence was caused partly because, first, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) had been defeated militarily in the Gaza Strip by late 1971/early 1972 (Roy 1995, p. 105); second, because of the weakening of the PLO following its exile to Tunisia in 1982; and third, because the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood was yet to engage in armed struggle against the occupation with the emergence of Hamas in 1987 (Roy 1995, pp. 104–105). Because there was no credible vehicle in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the early- and mid-1980s to provide organising structures, logistical assistance, financial support and network experience to facilitate a desire for armed action (as was the case for the members of PIJ in the early- and mid-1980s), several Gazans engaged in stabbings as one of few means perceived as feasible to resist occupation.

The scope of this article prevents me from providing an elaborate historical background on PIJ. It suffices to note that the nucleus of the movement was established in Egypt in 1980 by a group of Palestinian students led by Fathi al-Shiqaqi. As these students returned to the Gaza Strip in 1981, the nucleus soon seceded from the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 due to disputes on the need for the Islamic movement to participate in the Palestinian armed struggle. While the nucleus declared the necessity of struggle now, and not later, the Brotherhood stressed the need for proselytisation first and rebuilding Islamic values in Palestinian society (Skare 2021). While PIJ spent the first years organising its base in the Gaza Strip, it engaged in armed action against the Israeli occupation in 1984 (interview with Anwar Abu Taha, March 19, 2018, Beirut).

PIJ in the early and mid-1980s had not, however, developed into the organisation as we know it today. PIJ did not reveal its name before the eruption of the First Intifada in 1987, for example, and it was only in 1992 that the movement developed the effective organisational structures existing today (Skare 2021, pp. 146–147). It was also yet to broker its alliance with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, which provided PIJ with logistical and financial assistance from the late 1980s/early 1990s (see e.g. Hatina 2001, p. 41). Lastly, the recruitment efforts of PIJ were impeded in the early 1980s by its disputes with the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, as the latter both verbally and physically assaulted members and sympathisers of PIJ (Skare 2021, pp. 60–62).

With limited possibilities for PIJ in this period, a number of its members, such as al-Khalid Ju'aydi, Fakhri al-Dahduh, Muhammad Abu Jalala, Nidal al-Zalum, Ziyad al-Salmi, and Yasir al-Khawaja, engaged in stabbings of Israelis (both civilians and soldiers) in the mid-1980s. Indeed, PIJ termed this period the 'revolution of knives' (*thawrat al-sakākīn*) – just as it thirty years later dubbed the wave of violence in 2015–2016 (Saraya al-Quds 2017).

It is implausible that the deprivations and frustrations of the Palestinians alone should automatically lead to the stabbings in the mid-2010s, as they have been a constant feature. This is stressed by al-Ju'aydi, explaining why he carried out the same type of attack in the mid-1980s, when he spoke of the frustrations and humiliations caused by the Israeli occupation leading to his acts of violence:

> I saw with my own eyes the aggression of the Israeli occupation forces against the Palestinian students at the Ashqelon intersection in Gaza City, including forcing one student to kiss another, while another was forced to kiss a donkey. There were [additionally] the arrests of students and the daily humiliation, so I was terribly angry and there was nothing I could do'. (Saraya al-Quds 2015a)

Yet, more importantly, al-Ju'aydi emphasised the feasibility of the stabbings as he could afford them – with few other alternatives available to those wishing to participate in the armed Palestinian struggle. Al-Ju'aydi only had to pay one and a half Israeli shekels for the bus ticket from his home in Rafah to Gaza City, and another one and a half Israeli shekels for the knife (Saraya al-Quds 2011c; both amounts are equivalent to just a few pounds or dollars in today's currency). As he implied, everyone – no matter their social or economic status – could do the same.

The low financial costs of al-Ju'aydi's operations are informative of the absence of effective organisational structures in the mid-1980s: 'We [in PIJ] did not have an easy time in that period, and we did not have money. Indeed, we put aside our own personal savings and spent them on those [armed] operations' (Saraya al-Quds 2015b). As a former member of PIJ's political bureau, Abdallah al-Shami, recalls of this period: 'In the beginning, the [military] possibilities were limited and non-existing [for PIJ]' (Saraya al-Quds 2013c). The trajectories of other PIJ militants corroborate this assessment. Misbah al-Suri, Bashir al-Dabash, and Ra'id Abu Fanuna, for example, all sold their wives' jewellery to participate in the armed Palestinian struggle. Al-Suri sold his wife's jewellery to afford a Kalashnikov, and al-Dabash did so to 'spend on the movement's activities, which was in financial straits at the time' (Saraya al-Quds 2011a, 2013b). In addition to the jewellery of his wife, Abu Fanuna also sold his own belongings in order to purchase weapons and equipment for 'the mujahidin' (2013a).

Muhammad Abu Jalala, who carried out a stabbing in 1991, is another indicative case of violence in the absence of movements to facilitate an organised struggle. As he recalls, there were weapons in the Gaza Strip and 'some caches in the stores'. Yet, he had to acquire the weapons himself.

Accordingly, Abu Jalala attempted to collect money at the eye hospital where he was working to afford the costs. Successfully collecting 8,000 Jordanian dinars, Abu Jalala searched for weapons and grenades in Gaza – only to discover that the occupation authorities had already arrested the group from which he wished to purchase them (2011b). Only when he failed to procure weapons did Abu Jalala carry out a stabbing in 1991.

The types of attacks PIJ carried out from the mid-1980s reflect the absence of efficient organisational structures. That is, without any clear pattern of violence in the mid-1980s, and without adhering to any particular method or means, PIJ was in many respects in the same situation as Hamas was in the late 1980s as the latter engaged in opportunistic violence determined by what was available to the movement (Kristianasen 1999, p. 21, Skare 2021, p. 93). Although the situation in Gaza of the mid-1980s differed from that in the West Bank in the mid-2010s, the preceding account illustrates that the violence of PIJ took the form of individual stabbings in the absence of formalised, effective organisational vehicles capable of channelling discontent. It is thus in the context of pre-developed and inefficient organisational structures that we may understand why these Palestinians focused on the cheap costs and the practicability of stabbings and individualised violence.

More important, as these Palestinian youths of the mid-1980s carried out the stabbings independently, separately, and without any coherent organising principles they never transcended a state of being insulated eruptions of discontent. It was only with the eruption of the First Intifada that a Palestinian mass uprising developed organising principles for the first time in decades – principles required to sustain the protest for several years.

Can an uprising sustain momentum without organising principles?

There are important differences between the mid-1980s and the mid-2010s. The stabbings in the mid-1980s, for example, transpired in a transitory period leading to the emergence of new (Islamist) representatives of armed Palestinian struggle. This occurred mainly because the Palestinian resistance moved its geographical centre from the neighbouring Arab countries to the Occupied Palestinian Territories for the first time since 1948 (Høigilt 2013), and due to the regional rise of Islamism as a perceived liberation ideology. The stabbings in 2015–2016, on the other hand, occurred largely due to what I term a Palestinian political fossilisation. This fossilisation is characterised by the current Palestinian gerontocracy with the rule of an increasingly aging national leadership; decreasing economic and social mobility; the factions' monopolisation of Palestinian politics with little space for grassroots initiatives; authoritarian turns in both the West Bank and Gaza; a lack of possibilities to implement domestic political reform from below; and the resumption of security cooperation between the Israeli authorities and the PA.

Young Palestinians today face what Høigilt (2015) terms a 'double repression' by the occupying Israeli state and by the PA in the West Bank. Although Palestinians faced repression in the 1980s, with both violent and non-violent modes of resistance being criminalised, one should not underestimate the added repression from a Palestinian side considering that 'the PA's repression is more effective and more damaging' given that it is 'an indigenous authoritarian regime rather than an external occupier' (El Kurd 2019, p. 3).

Alternative modes of political organising with roots in Palestinian civil society have also been weakened. Whereas the difficulties with which Palestinians could express themselves freely in the 1970s led to the establishment of 'alternative vehicles for education and mobilization', with the emergence of '[s]tudent and professional associations, trade unions, women's societies, social and cultural associations, and other grass-roots organization' (Darweish and Rigby 2015, p. 57), many of these associations transformed into 'elitist, professional and politically independent NGOs' during the Oslo process in the 1990s (Merz 2012, p. 55). Similarly, following the Second Intifada, many Palestinians feel that 'personal rather than collective benefit motivated everything from aid distribution that political parties organized to human rights training by NGOs', and that 'their national movement has disintegrated' (Allen 2013, p. 9). What previously constituted non-violent

countercurrents of resistance against the occupation and existing Palestinian elites thus gradually saw their mobilising potential diminish with the internalisation of the 'global aid community's mantra of professionalisation and political neutrality', and 'as a result, became less engaged in the explicitly political, nationalist project' (Merz 2012, pp. 55–56). Few viable platforms thus exist for young Palestinians in the West Bank to organise politically because existing alternatives have either been uprooted, gone underground, or risk facing violent repression. A case in point is the Palestinian human rights defender, Nizar Banat, who was killed by the PA's security services because of his criticism of the Authority's policies and corrupt politicians (see e.g. Abu Artema 2021).

If we assume, then, that effective or credible Palestinian organising vehicles are significantly weakened, this has implications for contemporary challenges – not because mass protests will not erupt, but because the lack of organising principles significantly shortens their potential longevity. The eruption of protests in 2015–2016, for example, was never likely to sustain its pressure, not merely because the stabbers were killed or arrested, but because the violence was not guided and directed towards any goal besides the infliction of immediate harm. Its political potential thus quickly ebbed away.

This is illustrated by the developing rate of the stabbings: from rapidly shooting up to more than sixty attacks in September and October 2015, they dropped equally swiftly to forty in December and further to twenty-four in January 2016. The stabbings then stabilised around ten attacks per month from April until August 2016 (Chorev 2019, pp. 1290–1291). Accordingly, what marks the wave of violence is not the uncontrolled fury of the stabbings, but rather the rapidity of their collapse; little indicates they could provide any organising principle that would have led to a durable Palestinian mass uprising. What we witnessed in the West Bank 2015–2016 was essentially a series of insulated events marked by their individualism – and while their ferociousness created fear in Israeli society, this fear also masked the impotence of the violence.

By contrast, what accounted for the Palestinians' ability to sustain the First Intifada was not fire and fury alone. Rather, it was Palestinian trade unions, women's committees, and popular grassroots organisations (Hiltermann 1991, p. 213), which in turn required 'numerous stages of recruitment, organization, and perception of common interest to reach levels sufficient to ignite and sustain a national movement' (ibid., p. 3). While Palestinians in the late 1980s had an organisational framework to rely on, and an apparatus to assist them, the stabbers in the mid-2010s acted on their own initiative, guided by their own personal experience and grievances. The description by some observers of the unrest as an 'intifada of individuals' (Harel 2013) was thus particularly apt.

Though questions have been raised regarding the relevance of political parties (see e.g. Mueller, 2017, Applebaum, 2019), with a declining influence and global collapse of membership (Whiteley 2011, van Biezen and Poguntke 2014), contemporary leaderless or decentralised protest movements have not convinced as viable alternatives. Dean (2016), for example, largely developed her argument for the organising of the (communist) political party as a response to what she perceived as the impotent individualism of Occupy Wall Street in 2011, which caused the movement to collapse shortly after. Tufekci (2017), on the other hand, refers to the failure of the Gezi Park protests in June 2013 with their anarchic nature, lack of recognised leadership and organisational structures, the predominance of individual decision-making, and the persisting confusion throughout the event. Lastly, Batmanghelichi (2021) shows similar tendencies of protest insulation of feminist activism in Iran.

These issues are not new. Lenin (1902) lamented more than one hundred years ago that:

> There is a mass of people […] who desire to protest […] the intolerableness of which […] is more and more acutely sensed by increasing masses of the people. At the same time, we have no people, because we have no leaders, no political leaders, no talented organisers capable of arranging extensive and at the same time uniform and harmonious work that would employ all forces, even the most inconsiderable.

I do not suggest that the Palestinian factions are, or can be, the only solution to the impasse as there is little doubt that they suffer from deep and structural problems. They do not unreasonably alienate

Palestinian youths. Other forms of collective organising from the bottom up may be more feasible. As Darweish and Rigby describe the 1970s in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (2015, p. 57):

> Denied the opportunity to express themselves openly in any overtly political organisation, activists within the occupied territories established other vehicles for education and mobilization. Student and professional associations, trade unions, women's societies, social and cultural associations, and other grass-roots organisations were formed.

Nor do I suggest that strict, organised protests cannot be equally short-lived. On the contrary, they may be violently crushed, or the dullness of everyday bureaucratic work may disillusion those desiring immediate change. Yet, it seems evident that the organised party or movement has inherent advantages and qualities that leaderless movements do not possess, as organising principles can shape and intensify practical struggles by strategically channelling discontent, also after crowds disperse (Dean 2016, pp. 6, 152).

Essentially, the protests of 2015 imploded because they were incapable of developing the required 'network internalities', which is the time, energy, gained trust and understanding 'about the ways of working and decision making together' that activists develop over time. In other words, protests and riots are unlikely to gain sustainability and long-term (or even mid-term) success without these network internalities as 'essential pillars of support' (Tufekci 2017, pp. 75–76) with which activists can re-group, re-organise, and engage once more from the ashes of defeat with an added understanding founded on a shared experience of struggle – a possibility of resilience, durability, and potential for politico-tactical refinement the individual Palestinian stabber cannot offer because of the individualism of his or her *modus operandi*. While the Palestinian stabber was guided only by their own limited, personal experience, the political party is a carrier of knowledge produced by political experience which far exceeds what any one person is capable of knowing (Dean 2016, p. 26).

Conclusion

At the time of writing in July 2021, Palestinian mass protests have erupted, and spread from, Jerusalem. As they intensified, a clear Palestinian national identity became visible through the social media campaigns combined with an intertwining of the grassroots networks connecting Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel (Anabtawi and Brown 2021). Similarly, the significant presence of students and 'secular Palestinians from the middle class' (ibid.) largely confirm that their cynicism with politics reflects the abandonment of traditional Palestinian party politics rather than a weakening of nationalist Palestinian sentiments. Despite the lack of a long-term political strategy, and the persisting fragmentation along political, geographical, and social lines, new connections are created between the 'new activism' of Palestinian youth and already-existing local committees mobilising around specific causes (Abou-Hodeib 2021, p. 15).

The shorter, unsuccessful eruptions of discontent this decade are hence not necessarily an indicator of futility. Mass protests erupting spontaneously, with political organising only occurring subsequently, are still possible – and, indeed, probable. The general assessment of 1981 was, too, that no Palestinian collective actions against the occupation could occur, and the First Intifada was also preceded by a series of smaller uprisings seldom lasting more than two months (Hiltermann 1991, p. 3). While there seems to be a preliminary return to a status quo, there is still room for hope without optimism.

This article's main contribution is thus two-fold. My findings contribute empirically by demonstrating that the stabbings of 2015 were not a new phenomenon – in terms of the means employed, the targets chosen, and the grievances experienced. It also adds to the literature by exploring conditions for certain types of resistance and the implications for their future success. Specifically, it contributes to the emerging discussion on the difficulties leaderless movements and spontaneous protests face – and to what extent they may succeed. Popular Palestinian political organisation

also matters because it may determine to what extent a future uprising develops into a non-violent one as in the late 1980s or one characterised by blood and twisted metal as in the early 2000s. The absence of the First Intifada's grassroots organisations did not merely weaken political alternatives to centres of power, but it also caused the Second Intifada to turn into a militarised confrontation between elites (Høigilt 2013, p. 349).

I anticipate certain objections to my analysis. Some may argue that we do not have clear numbers on the organising rate of Palestinian youth and to what extent they have shifted throughout the period following the Second Intifada. The Palestinian Center for Policy & Survey Research, for example, does not assess political affiliation in its polls, but rather political support.[1] Nor does the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA) have 'concrete statistics on the organizing rate of Palestinian youth' (email correspondence with author, July 18, 2020; email correspondence with author, July 22, 2020). In response, I argue that good data on faction *affiliation* is notoriously difficult to obtain because of the Israeli occupation and its repression of political organising in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Yet, to analyse long-lasting trends with a transparent reading of available sources – both contemporary and historical ones – is more beneficial than ignoring those we have available.

A second valid objection is that there is no direct causal mechanism from the lack of legitimacy for the traditional Palestinian factions and the stabbings in 2015–2016 – with the former automatically leading to the latter. The lack of trust in the factions and in traditional party politics may also lead to Palestinian political withdrawal and apathy. Yet, there is a distinction between stating that the experienced illegitimacy of current factions is the *only* reason for this type of violence and to state that the lack of trust in current political structures has accelerated this development in a specific segment of the Palestinian youth population.

The questions that remain is whether the Palestinian factions can regain the trust of their aggrieved youth population or be relegated to the dustbins of history. Similarly, one may question to what degree future Palestinian protest movements that emerge as an alternative outside of factional politics can succeed without clear organising principles, streamlining hierarchies, and the development of network internalities. My postulation is that leaderless protests may gain momentum and worldwide attention rapidly. It is doubtful, however, whether they can preserve and build upon their short-term victories.

Note

1. I also contacted the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) without receiving any response.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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