



NORTH AFRICA, WEST ASIA: OPINION

Young Palestinians are changing old geographies

The struggle for Palestine is old, but the movement belongs to the youth who are leading the uprising against Israeli discrimination and occupation

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Palestinian boy next to police during a demonstration against the expulsion of Palestinian families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, 7 May 2021 | Eddie Gerald / Alamy Stock Photo. All rights reserved

There are many elements of the uprisings that are currently swelling across historic Palestine that may be easy or convenient to ignore, but one of the key characteristics that cannot be overlooked is the fact that they are initiated, led and maintained by the youth –whether in Jerusalem or within Israeli borders.

On the first day of Ramadan this year, 13 April, only young Jerusalemites were demonstrating outside Damascus Gate against the Israeli police's closure of the plaza. For 13 continuous days, they staged a non-violent protest that eventually culminated in the reopening of the plaza.

In the past week, in cities and towns across historic Palestine, the protestors were also young, mostly liberal and very determined. In Jerusalem itself, they showed very little fear and acted with a great degree of courage and daring. In towns inside historic Palestine, they acted with responsibility and vigilance; their objective was to monitor the movement of right-wing Israeli mobs and block their attempts to attack Palestinians and their properties.

It was the first time we had experienced an up-close, fist-to-fist confrontation with the police and the Israeli mobs (often armed) at the same time; when they pushed, we pushed back. The Israeli army used stun grenades, 'skunk' water, rubber-coated bullets and mounted forces to disperse the Palestinian youth. But the latter were able to quickly regroup via the small side streets – streets they know very well, giving them the upper hand.

Those taking part were mostly in their twenties, with smartphones glued to their palms. Everything was filmed, often live-streamed. They understood very quickly the importance of the 'new media', of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and all the other platforms they have become extremely savvy at navigating.

They were dressed in black shirts with baseball caps to avoid easy detection. Although face masks are no longer mandatory in public, they kept them on for additional protection. They communicated at an extraordinary pace, sending swift, abbreviated messages via WhatsApp in colloquial Arabic – which is not meant to be used for writing.

United geography

Many of the current generation of youth in Jerusalem were born after the Second Intifada (2000-05); they recall very little, if anything, from it, yet they live the humiliating reality that emerged from it. Those located in the towns and villages inside the Israeli borders are third-generation survivors of the Nakba.

Their grandparents felt fortunate enough to survive their expulsion in 1948. Their parents worked hard to secure a better and more stable economic life. But the current generation is refusing and rejecting their subclass treatment under discriminatory Israeli policies.

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After 73 years of occupation, the actions of this third generation of Palestinians is establishing some new realities.

They have revolted against the old divided political geography that fragments Palestinians across several different areas. The new wave of uprisings has aligned the objectives of the struggle on both sides of the Green Line (the 1949 armistice line that lasted until the Six-Day War in 1967), intrinsically connecting them.

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The social identity of Palestinians is not only being connected across human-made borders, but this unity is becoming crystallised. Meanwhile, Israel continues to implement an apartheid system – as Human Rights Watch reported last month – that sees every non-Jew as “the Other” or as a security risk that must be managed. As a result, young Palestinians from the river to the sea are framing the Palestinian struggle as a fight against apartheid.

Perhaps most distressing to those who would rather manage this conflict than solve it, young Palestinians are dusting off 73 years of occupation and forcing it right on to the table.

As the new Biden administration attempts to define the role of the US in the Middle East in the post-Trump era, the Israeli government will be entering its fifth election in two years, while the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah continues to fail to play any important political role.

Within the gaps formed by these political failings, it is young people who are taking the initiative, drawing attention to the occupation and presenting a vision for solving it. It is a solution that Israel considers an existential threat, and one that seems more like a dream than reality for the Palestinians: a single democratic state.

This should not be seen as strange or uncalled-for. Most of the population of the Middle East is young. In the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, youth (those aged 18–29) make up around 22% of Palestinian society; almost 40% of them are unemployed, a figure rising to 52% for those with higher education.

And although they have been marginalised from the political arena, they are inspired by recent movements across the Middle East and North Africa that have thrown off long-established dictatorships. They might have been born into a grim past, but this will not stop them from shaping a brighter future.

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