

Palestinian student and youth movements in protracted settler-colonialism. The (re)elaboration of strategies of liberation

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Abstract—This article documents the contribution of the Palestinian transnational youth and student movements to the national liberation struggle. It aims at highlighting the role young generations in Diaspora have played in elaborating strategies of resistance in different moments and phases of the struggle against the colonization of Palestine. The article provides a brief analysis of how Palestinian student movements have contributed to the reorganisation of the scattered Palestinian society and the re-articulation of the political discourse in the aftermath of the Nakba. It will then elaborate on the political role of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS). Finally, it will introduce contemporary Palestinian student and youth initiatives. The article argues that Palestinian youth and students are a fundamental actor of Palestinian politics and suggests that Palestinian young generation have been able to play a vanguard role as long as they understood their struggle within an anti-colonial framework. — *Setter Colonialism, Youth, Student movements, Palestine, Diaspora.*

Abstract—Questo articolo documenta il contributo apportato dal movimento giovanile e studentesco transnazionale palestinese nell'ambito della lotta di liberazione nazionale. Mira a mettere in evidenza il ruolo svolto dalle giovani generazioni in diaspora nell'elaborare strategie di resistenza in diversi momenti e fasi diverse della lotta contro la colonizzazione della Palestina. L'articolo fornisce una breve analisi dei modi in cui il movimento studentesco palestinese ha contribuito alla riorganizzazione della società palestinese in diaspora e alla riarticolazione di un discorso politico subito dopo la Nakba. Verrà poi discusso il ruolo politico svolto dall'Unione Generale degli Studenti Palestinesi (GUPS). Infine, verranno presentate le varie iniziative giovanili e studentesche delle generazioni contemporanee. La tesi fondante è che la gioventù e gli studenti palestinesi siano ancora degli attori fondamentali nella politica palestinese. Viene inoltre suggerito che le nuove generazioni palestinesi sono state capaci di svolgere un ruolo di avanguardia fintantoché sono riuscite ad inserire le proprie rivendicazioni in un contesto di lotta anti-coloniale. — *Colonialismo d'insediamento, Movimenti giovanili, Movimenti studenteschi, Palestina, Diaspora.*

This article documents the contribution of the Palestinian transnational youth and student movements to the national liberation struggle. It aims at highlighting

the role young generations in *al-shatat*¹ have played in

¹ *Al-shatat* can loosely be translated as “diaspora”.

elaborating strategies of resistance in different moments and phases of the struggle against the colonization of Palestine and the annihilation of its indigenous people.

The role of student movements in bringing about political and social transformations has been acknowledged by several studies that have demonstrated how students' activism has become the driving force beyond social and political change. However, while it is well documented that during the “era of decolonisation” youth and students have often acted as the «most effective agency of anti-colonialism» (Benda 1962: 237), the transformation of young generations' role in (re)elaborating strategies of resistance in a prolonged and ongoing project of settler colonialism has received little attention. How do new generations born in exile contribute to the anti-colonial struggle of their people despite geographical fragmentation and the changing socio-political context at the domestic and international levels? How does the persistence of the settler colonial project impact on different generations and shapes their role in the liberation struggle over time? How does the generational shift required by the protracted context of colonisation and exile impact on the struggle for liberation?

The study of Palestinian youth participation in the liberation movement aims at answering these questions.

There are two factors that render the Palestinian case particularly worthy of examination for the study of youth and student role in anti-colonial struggles: its unique condition of geographical dispersion and its historic persistence. Palestinians have long been the world's largest refugee population. In total, 7.1 million Palestinians (67 percent of the total population) have experienced displacement. The unique condition of statelessness and refugeness of the majority of the nation is the consequence of Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine and its attempt to eradicate the indigenous population. The geographical fragmentation that characterises Palestinian society has historically impacted on the political strategies and modus operandi of the liberation movement: transnationalism has become a constitutive element of political mobilisation for a nation forced to reorganize in exile. As a matter of fact, in the aftermath of the Nakba, Palestinians have overcome regional and global boundaries reorganising their socio-political structures transnationally; they established numerous political parties and movements, women's groups, camp committees, unions and professional associations operating across borders. Youth and students have historically contributed to the emergence and development of these structures and have played a pivotal role in the reorganisation of Palestinian

society and its political texture. Moreover, the length and perpetration of the Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine has impacted on the way new generations of Palestinians (re)define their identity and understand their role in national politics: born in exile, geographically disconnected from the homeland and the rest of the Palestinian people, growing up in other countries, exposed to other cultures, traditions, languages and political systems that shape their everyday life, young Palestinians develop a “hybrid identity” and have to undergo a process of political reflections in order to encompass all these diversities in a overarching understanding of “Palestinianess” (Schulz 2003). In this sense, the historical persistence of the Palestinian cause offers a long timeframe and a rich historical repository for examining continuities and discontinuities in youth and students role in different phases of national liberation.

Several analyses of student political activism in anti-colonial struggle have highlighted its major contribution to the decolonisation process in Asia and Africa and, more broadly in the Third World. In *Student Politics Perspectives for the Eighties*, Altbach points out that student movements in Third World nations have been more effective than those in industrialised societies in bringing about revolutionary transformations. Unlike in Western countries, “students in the Third World are a consistent, important, and even a legitimate part of the political equation” (Altbach 1981: 5). In another work, Altbach develops this concept further and suggests that students are often considered «spokespersons for a broader population» and a «conscience of their society» which can organise and mobilise larger sectors of society (Altbach 1989: 14).

While the literature on the role of student movements in national liberation struggles is not exhaustive, the studies available account for student contributions in articulating anti-colonial and anti-imperialist discourses, and in shaping national movement strategies for achieving liberation and cultural emancipation (Barnejee 2003). Students were identified as one of the first sectors of colonised societies to be drawn to prevailing ideas of radicalism and nationalism and to introduce and disseminate these modern ideologies amongst their own society.

This article builds on, and intends to specify further, this body of scholarships, by looking at the experience of the Palestinian transnational student movement. It aims to analyse how Palestinian transnational student activism has contributed to the development of the anti-colonial framework and discourse of their struggle in different times of Palestinian political history: it investigates the

changes in the role and strategies of student movements in national liberation struggles. After a short section on methodology, the article will provide a brief analysis of how Palestinian student movements have contributed to the reorganisation of the scattered Palestinian society and the re-articulation of the political discourse in the aftermath of the Nakba. In particular, it refers to the experience of Palestinian student activism in Beirut and Cairo. It will then elaborate on the political role of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) in the development of the Palestinian resistance's anti-colonial vision and strategies and the transformation undergone by the Union over the decades. Finally, it will introduce contemporary Palestinian student and youth initiatives in light of the political changes and dynamics that have characterised Palestinian politics. Taking the Palestinian Youth Movement as a case study, this paper aims to highlight the contemporary Palestinian youth articulation of political discourses and goals. It will particularly address how PYM came to address some of the contradictions Palestinian new generations have to face and elaborate a new understanding of Palestinian identity for the youth scattered across the world through the (re)production of a polity which problematized and abandoned the 'state building' and 'civil society' rhetoric inherited by the previous generation.

In this article I argue that Palestinian youth and students are a fundamental actor of Palestinian politics: the protracted condition of colonisation requires a constant generational shift in order to sustain the struggle for liberation.

I suggest that Palestinian young generation have been able to play a vanguard role as long as they understood their struggle within an anti-colonial framework. Despite the discontinuities and challenges Palestinian politics faces, new generations are reorganising in order to reclaim their central role in the struggle and in the re-elaboration of successful strategies of liberation based on anti-colonialism.

METHODOLOGY

This article build on empirical research largely based on interviews with Palestinian members or former members of Palestinian student and youth movements. Drawing on advanced oral history methodologies, interviews on student activism in the post-Nakba period have been based on the 'life history approach' and have focused on the student unions' relationship with national movements, political leaders in the host-countries and the local Palestinian community (Thompson 2000). Information has

also been gathered regarding political coordination with Palestinian student movements in other countries. The interviews have been conducted between 2011 and 2016. My long-term residence in the region has facilitated the collection of primary and secondary material, in particular Arabic sources, and above all has allowed me to establish lengthy and inspiring discussions with crucial protagonists of Palestinian and Arab political history. I have conducted over forty interviews on the Palestinian student movements of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and have met several Palestinians who had initiated the first Palestinian student associations and movements. The interviewees have been contacted by using 'snowballing' as a method of selection: I approached them equipped with a recommendation from another activist or scholar (Bryman 2008: 184–185); being introduced by other Palestinian leaders and militants has guaranteed a high level of trust and willingness to be interviewed from most of the participants. These interviews took place in Amman, Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Tunis and Rome, and on a few occasions conducted on Skype. For the analysis of the PYM in the post-Oslo period, I rely on the text analysis of internal documents, by-laws, statements and political papers all accessible through my participation to the meetings, conferences and international schools organized by the movement. My personal direct involvement with PYM –since its inception as a Network in 2006– has allowed me to engage with long and inspiring, formal and informal, discussions with members and cadres of the movement and its different branches all over the world. At the same time, recent analysis of PYM at the academic level have provided an invaluable contribution to the study I carry out in this article: in particular, Loubna Qutami (2018) dissertation on the history and development of the Movement constitutes a fundamental reference for the work presented here.

THE POST-NAKBA PERIOD

In the immediate aftermath of the Nakba, Palestinian student activism played a crucial role in reorganising their scattered society transnationally, by articulating the political revolutionary discourse of the Palestinian struggle. It provided the political framework and strategies with which to carry out the struggle for liberation and return and it laid the political basis for the development of the Palestinian movements and groups that subsequently led the PLO. In fact, the student unions and societies established throughout the 1950s in Cairo, Beirut, Amman, Damascus, Baghdad, and several other cities constituted the first successful attempt to rebuild the social and po-

litical structure of a stateless Palestinian people in exile. Accordingly, they were treated by the people and the leaders of the countries within which they existed not only as simple student movements, but also as representative bodies for the Palestinian refugees. The broad popular support these societies and unions could boast must be understood in the political context in which it developed: these Palestinian students managed to translate into a clear, simple and radical language their people's disaffection and disillusionment with traditional political rhetoric and strategies. Moreover, since the student movements were deeply rooted in their communities, their grassroots strategies made their attempt to politically engage Palestinian and Arab societies successful.

Two main experiences have characterised the history of Palestinian student activism in the post-*Nakba* period: that of Palestinian students in Beirut and that of Palestinian students in Cairo. They are two different stories with very different strategies, but in their differences they both represented Palestinians as well as Arabs in their quest for a radical, revolutionary change. And in fact, from these different experiences the resistance movements that led the Palestinian struggle in subsequent years were born.

In Beirut, the activities of Palestinian students, along with other Arab colleagues, particularly at the American University (AUB), were fundamental to the establishment of the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM), the mother movement of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) (Kazziha 1975; Bārūt 1997; Al-Kubaisi 1971). The student group, among which was also George Habash, who in 1951 won elections and ran the *Jam'iyyat al-Urwa al-Wathqa*, the historical student society of AUB, firmly believed that the revolution Palestinians and Arabs were waiting for could only be achieved by the mobilisation of the masses, thus it was fundamental to establish an organisation of mass struggle. Leading the student society, this core group of students was able to radicalise the political discourse of their colleagues in universities and schools as well as in refugee camps: they understood the liberation of Palestine and the return of refugees as a crucial precondition for the defeat of neo-colonialism and imperialism and as interdependent to the liberation of the Arab world (Ghusayni 1972). This political vision was spread and disseminated not only through political demonstrations and protests in universities, but also through the organisation of social activities and cultural events during which political readings were discussed, the liberation struggles of other colonised people were explained, and anti-colonial, anti-

imperialist and pan-Arab principles were presented as the basis of the Palestinian plight².

At the same time, a similar movement was seeing the light in Egypt (Brand 1998). The political activism of Palestinian students in Cairo, in fact, laid the basis for the establishment of Fatah (Palestinian National Liberation Movement). Among the students who won elections in the Palestinian Student Union in Cairo as early as 1952 were Yaser Arafat and Abu Iyad. The political analysis at the center of their platform was very simple: «Palestinians could rely only on themselves» (Abū and Rouleau 1981). While still acknowledging the 'Arab dimension' of the Palestinian struggle and appealing to the pan-Arab sentiments of the masses, these students promoted self-reliance and the assertion of Palestinian identity.

The Union's activities were oriented in two specific directions: helping Palestinian students in Egypt and, as a former student of that time explained «putting Palestine back on the map» through intense student and Palestinian community mobilization and diplomatic actions at the domestic, regional and international level.

The Palestinian Student Union (PSU) provided support to Palestinian students and refugees with bureaucratic and administrative issues, organised social and cultural events at the scope to reconnect the Palestinian community and voice its aspiration to justice³. It cultivated constant and strong relationships with student unions in other countries, supporting their struggles and frequently participating in their activities: Third World solidarity inspired PSU international networking. In particular, Palestinian students played a crucial role in the establishment of a General Union of Arab Students (GUAS), thus again putting Palestine at the core of the regional political process (Interview with Abu Maizar). GUAS was founded in 1959 – the same year GUPS was established.

2 Details on the activities of the Urwa and the ANM initial group were collected through personal interviews to members of the Urwa al-Wathqa and ANM, among which: Hani al-Hindi, co-funder of ANM, Amman December 2011; Sobhi Ghosheh, member of the Urwa al-Wathqa in 1951 and then member of ANM, Amman, January 2012; Salah Dabbagh, member of the Urwa al-Wathqa in 1952/53 and then member of ANM.

3 Details on the activities of the PSU were collected through personal interviews to members, among which: Mohammad Abu Maizar, Ba'th representative in the PSU Executive Committee in 1959, May 2011, Amman; Zuhair al-Khatib, President of the GUPS in 1959 and is currently President of the General Union of Palestinian Lawyers and Jurists, Amman, May 2011; Farouq Qaddumi, member of PSU executive committee in 1958, Head of the PLO Political Department, Tunis, September 2012.

THE GUPS: FROM VANGUARD TO SOLIDARITY

The GUPS founding conference was held in Cairo with the fundamental contribution of the Cairo Palestinian Student Union and the participation of student unions from Alexandria, Asyut, Damascus and Baghdad (Brand 1988). The political vision of the GUPS was based on the simple principles of anti-colonialism and liberation from the river to the sea; the Union included students from the various Palestinian political movements, groups and factions and the composition of the GUPS executive committee often reflected the ‘balance of power’ among Palestinian political forces (Interview with Abu Maizar). GUPS was the first Palestinian popular organisation established transnationally, students were aware of their “vanguard role” (GUPS 1962) and aimed to foster ties with other Palestinian popular organisations. In the absence of a national movement, GUPS was the most active Palestinian union among Palestinians as well as at the international level (Brand 1988).

The centralised structure GUPS assured a solid transnational strategy: Palestinians studying in Europe established branches of GUPS in Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Austria, and the UK. Transnational co-ordination was intensive: in 1966 there were already 27 branches throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and the USA with an estimated membership of 15,000. (Van Mannen 1966: 324) GUPS soon developed a successful international political strategy: it could send delegations to conferences of friendly student unions, lobby international student institutions for expressing solidarity with Palestinians and push for the issuing of communiqués or resolutions in favor of the Palestinian cause among student movements as well as political parties and forces worldwide.

GUPS established contacts and cooperation with Unions of other oppressed people and played a fundamental role in the elaboration of radical anti-colonial analyses in the International Union of Students (IUS) (Al-Husseini 1968). GUPS maintained this fundamental international role even after the national movement was established and insisted on the rejection of traditional leadership and diplomacy. In fact, Palestinian students remained sceptical of PLO role and strategies throughout the 1960s, considering the Organization a case in point of the old disastrous political dynamics; it was the product of Arab diplomacy, detached from the Palestinian people. Only when the popular organisations and parties, established in the previous years by students themselves, took control of the PLO institutions, and turned the organisation into a

more popular expression of the people’s will, the GUPS integrated into the structure of the organization.

FROM ANTI-COLONIALISM TO STATE-BUILDING

Palestinian students all over the world remained the central reference point for solidarity activists and political institutions alike throughout the 1960s (and to a lesser extent in the 1970s).

The nature of the GUPS shifted at the very beginning of the 1970s when the PLO became the umbrella institution under which the broad-based popular movements operated: the Student Union was incorporated into the PLO and even amended its constitution in order to better reflect the political connection to the national liberation movement. Palestinian transnational student activism was located inside the PLO structure and was intrinsically linked to the political development of the organisation. While the PLO has always acknowledged the crucial political contribution of the students⁴, GUPS became an internal arena of mobilisation, from within which the various Palestinian movements would recruit, and in which cadres would often receive their earliest political education. The strong connection and direct relations with the Palestinian parties and factions that constituted the national movement allowed GUPS to become an international solidarity-generating structure that could build political relations in the absence of PLO embassies or missions. This intensive political work paved the way for PLO’s successive achievements in establishing ties with international parties and strengthening diplomatic relations. But if students were able to maintain their central role of solidarity-generators among the masses until the late 1970s, keeping strong ties with Palestinian factions and parties, in the following years they – and all sectors of Palestinian society – had to reorganise and rethink their activism and role in light of two main events in Palestinian political history: the 1982 forced departure of the PLO from Beirut and the 1993 Oslo accords.

Both events have impacted on the practices, strategies and political discourse of Palestinian student movements and groups, especially at the transnational level. When the PLO left Beirut in 1982, its structures and apparatus lost their cohesiveness and effectiveness and underwent a process of bureaucratisation that negatively impacted on the popular organisations and unions, especially those in *al-shatat*, where their role rapidly eroded (Hilal 1993).

4 GUPS was given one seat out of a hundred members while the General Union of Palestinian Workers, GUPW, and the General Union of Palestinian Women were given one seat each (Hamid 1975).

The PLO political shift, along with the personalisation of power in the hands of a very restricted group, prevented the generational shift in the leadership that the length of the Israeli colonisation would have required; the youth lost the role of “vanguard” and solidarity-generator directly tied to the movement. Ever since, the new generations have not been able to play a prominent role in the development of national political strategies and Palestinian transnational youth activism has focused on achieving international solidarity and support for a political agenda that had already been set by the old leadership of the national movement. The lack of a substantial contribution of youth accelerated the paralysation and consequent failure of PLO political strategies and discourses.

This transformation was crystallised by the signing of the Oslo accord in 1993. The Oslo Agreements *de facto* formalised the PLO shift from a revolutionary movement working to achieve liberation and justice into a quasi-state apparatus willing to establish a mini-state (Gresh 1998: 149) concerned with land, boundaries and state-building discourse. Furthermore, the accords have deprived the struggle of its foundational principles slowly undermining its unity of intent (Abu Samra 2015). This shift has ratified the fragmentation of Palestinian society and the paralysation of Palestinian popular activism. In fact, the negotiations, the new language of neutrality and compromise imposed by Oslo and the “peace for land” rhetoric reinforced the political and geographic divisions that individualised and localised the Palestinian struggle. Palestinian society has been “chapterised” into “different groupings” with apparently different political agendas (Massad 2010: 982). In particular, Palestinians in *al-shatat* were marginalised and isolated from their own struggle, and when it became clear that, despite the dominating rhetoric, peace would not be achieved, they found themselves too disconnected from their own society, too detached from their own movements and did not know how to reorganise. The new generation of Palestinians born in exile was particularly affected by this dramatic development: this youth has not been prepared to take part in the liberation struggle, they were detached from the rest of their society and, above all, they were embedded in the new rhetoric imposed by Oslo that obfuscates the anti-colonial nature of the struggle bringing about confusion and uncertainty over the strategies and methodologies of liberation. This political conundrum has prevented the Palestinian youth from playing the vanguard role typical of previous generations and, in *al-shatat*, youths and students were not even able to

maintain the function of solidarity-generators. The post-Oslo period was characterised by the general impasse of Palestinian youth activism. Only with the sparking of the Second Intifada, the gradual decline and fall of the Oslo cornerstone, and the consequent slow process of self-criticism and re-examination of Palestinian political history, have Palestinian youth and students progressively reactivated and are attempting to reacquire a central role in reorganising the national movement.

THE OSLO GENERATION

Palestinian student activism in the past decade has been extremely dynamic. Student associations have contributed to the creation of high impact campaigns, in coordination with other student groups transnationally (notably through the PACBI and the IAW⁵). More importantly, Palestinian youth have slowly realized that their contribution to the liberation struggle cannot be limited to a role of solidarity-generator. Palestinian political crisis requires youth to elaborate new strategies, able to overcome the geographical and political fragmentation that the Oslo Agreement has attempted to institutionalize.

This challenge is ambitious: two and even three generations of Palestinians have been living outside Palestine, the difference in cultural, social and economic background and lived experiences is more marked and significant than previous decades. Palestinians all over the world face today a new challenging responsibility: “building” transnationally a common Palestinian identity able to incorporate these diversities and reframe their struggle within an anti-colonial paradigm in order to elaborate new strategies of liberation. Along with the differences that shape the perception of identity(ies) among Palestinian youth, the changed political environment at the domestic, regional and international system make the task of resisting settler colonialism and (re)elaborating anti-colonial strategies even harder. In this sense, the experience of the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) provides an important example of the new generation’s attempt to reorganise their participation in the struggle.

PYM is a transnational movement established by Palestinian youth from Palestine and in exile worldwide. It aims at being a «space that brings together Palestinian youth from all over the world with diverse views and various political, cultural and social backgrounds in a collective process of decision making, assuming responsibility, and action. By cultivating the skills of young

⁵ Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) <http://www.pacbi.org/> and the Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) <http://apartheidweek.org/>.

Palestinians it also works toward empowering the Palestinian grassroots movement around the world»⁶. The effort of Palestinian youth to create a transnational space able to provide them with the opportunity to engage with their struggle started in 2006 and initially converged into the establishment of a Network (PYN): young representatives of Palestinian youth groups and associations from all over the world met for the first time in Barcelona with the aim of discussing and analysing together the current state of Palestinian politics and understanding the possible role of younger generations in national politics. It is important to notice here that this first attempt to re-mobilise Palestinian youth within a broad transnational network came at a very delicate moment of Palestinian politics: Hamas had recently won the election and the fragmentation of what Jamil Hilal has defined the Palestinian political field was becoming a reality. The Oslo framework had clearly failed and its disastrous effects on Palestinian politics and society were now evident. The Palestinian Youth Network was born out of the necessity to question and challenge the political outcome of the previous decades of negotiations and the Palestinian diplomatic strategies that had led to the accords. However, reorganizing Palestinian youth politically within a common framework after years of political apathy presented several challenges. Amongst them, the most compelling issue was how to forge a collective consensus amidst acute differences across social, cultural, and economic lines; or how to overcome the fragmentation of geography and political ideologies engendered by the Oslo Accords (Qutami 2018). As Palestinian new generations born and raised in very different political and cultural environments, this issue translated in the fundamental question of who is a Palestinian and what identifies Palestinians as people. For the first few years of the Network life, new articulations of the Palestinian identity were constantly discussed in international conferences and summer schools, in an effort to include the diversities that forced exile has imposed upon the Palestinian society and for finding again the cohesion of the struggle, goals and strategies that seemed to be lost. Palestinian youth soon realised that Palestinian identity is a constructed one and that the common factor at the core of Palestinian society is the impact of the ongoing Nakba and the project of settler colonialism imposed on them. Ethnic cleansing, erasure, exile, define Palestinian identity much more than language, religion and even land. As a matter of fact, the acknowledgment of this histor-

ical and political dimension of Palestinian identity led to a new understanding also of Palestinian new generations' connection to the territory: while these youth acknowledge the strong belonging to the land, they see Palestine beyond the narrowed borders of its geography and understand it, instead, within a transnational and internationalist frame that makes the liberation of Palestine a central issue in the struggle against oppression worldwide (Labadi 2018).

This analysis and redefinition of Palestinian identity has shaped the political vision of the network first –and the movement then- and its strategies.

As a matter of fact, this political awareness translated into two important shifts: on the one side Palestinian political history was re-studied through anti-colonial and revolution lens; on the other side, Palestinian youth realised they needed a more grassroots political engagement and developed into a Movement, in 2011 (PYM).

PYM identified one of the main reasons for the failure of the resistance movement in the abandonment of the anti-colonial framework that used to characterised and inform the struggle in its early stages. This shift that overlooked the settler colonial nature of the Zionist project in Palestine and reframed the Palestinian struggle within the narrow framework of state-building was crystallized by the Oslo agreement bringing about political and economic dependence from the occupier, and the atomisation of the society.

Based on this analysis, PYM has attempted to develop a new strategy based on two main trajectories: the revitalisation of grassroots politics able to reconnect the Palestinian people to their struggle in order to rebuild a truly popular movement, and the repositioning of the Palestinian cause at the core of the Arab and international struggle against oppression. In this sense, PYM has been trying to re-build political relations and cooperation with other oppressed people highlighting the common struggle against an unbalanced power dynamic in the international system (Quintanilla and Mogannam 2015). At this regard, several PYM members have emphasised the necessity of continuity among different Palestinian generations in the struggle and the need to study, critically analyse and learn from previous generation examples. Jacqueline Husary, a researcher and PYM member has argued: «We want to get back to our radical roots, but we don't know where to start. [...] a good place is to start at the beginning» (interview with Husary). Palestinian youth have been trying to revamp the anti-colonial analysis of previous decades, stimulating anew the political framework of the Palestinian struggle.

⁶ Palestinian Youth Movement Website is available at <http://pal-youth.org/>.

Yet, while emphasising the continuity with the strategies of previous generations, PYM is also aware of the necessity to re-elaborate these analysis in light of contemporary socio-political differences.

If the 1960s and 1970s, were characterised by a favourable regional and international environment where the spirit of Arab and Third World solidarity contributed to the dissemination of the revolutionary discourse of the Palestinian movement, and even more, it allowed to translate it into concrete strategies of liberations, today Palestinian youth understand that the conditions in which they operate are different. The international context is now dominated by globalised neoliberal dynamics that impacted on international solidarity and transformed their strategies. Arab politics especially is trapped in neoliberal economic and political dependence and the Palestinian question is being marginalised in regional events. Even more, the conditions of the Palestinian society are radically different today, the geographical and political fragmentation of the post-Oslo period requires a new elaboration of theories and strategies for bringing the original principles of liberation, justice and anti-colonialism back at the core of the Palestinian national project.

This has not been an easy task. As a matter of fact, if PYM was able to establish several branches throughout Europe the Arab world and the USA up to 2014, in the past 4 years the movement has slowly lost its transnational dimension. Today there is only one active branch in the USA (with several chapters through the countries) and individual members in other regions. The reason for this decline is to be found in the inability of the young generation to face the complex political transformations in the Arab region and everywhere within a shared transnational framework and vision.

It is not the intent of this article to analyse the limit and failure of the Movement, what it is relevant for the purpose of this study is the effort PYM put in rearticulating and reframing the struggle within an anti-colonial discourse. While PYM is only one case of Palestinian new generation political activism, it well exemplifies the attempt to (re)define the struggle within an anti-colonial framework.

CONCLUSION

«Patriarchy is reflected in the very foundations of our social and political life as well, where it serves to inhibit the emergence of young people into the ranks of the leadership. In a period of rapid social movement, however, what is required is that generation's ascent, not its shack-

ling» (Kanafani 1990: 14). In 1968, Ghassan Khanafani denounced the inability of the national movement to introduce new blood into a political body, Khanafani describes this failure as “a crime” that «not only obstructs the arrival of a youthful vanguard, bringing new blood and influence [but] also obstructs a clear view of the enemy and a recognition of the depth and breadth of the danger it poses, as well as the establishment of any firm strategy for confronting it» (Omar 2014).

Khanafani analysis summarises the genealogy of Palestinian youth role and contribution in the national movement: it identifies in the youth's “fresh blood” a vanguard role, a role that students effectively played in reorganising Palestinian society around a shared vision of liberation and return during the 1950s. At the same time, Kanafani warned of the shift of youth contribution to the liberation struggle: the structures and dynamics of Palestinian political life are preventing youth from maintaining their vanguard role. Considering that this shift was so evident at the end of the 1960s, it became even more worrying in the following decades. However, today Palestinian new generations are attempting to invert this trend.

This paper has provided an analysis of the historiography of the Palestinian transnational student and youth movement. It has argued that Palestinian student movements have historically played a vanguard role in their national movement by contributing to the elaboration anti-colonial discourse and strategies for their struggle.

Palestinian student activism in the aftermath of the Nakba was based on a radical anti-colonial vision and aimed at the reorganisation of the scattered society. The political mobilisation of Palestinian students through the 1950s led to the establishment of GUPS that was first successful attempt to reorganize and revive Palestinian social and political structures transnationally and voice Palestinian political demands at the regional and international levels. The duration of the Israeli occupation, the consequent generational shift within the Palestinian resistance movement, and the political transformations that took place over the decades have required the constant participation of students. These factors have also engendered several changes and discontinuities in student movements' strategies and structures, and the manner in which students contributed to Palestinian political life.

As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the 1970s, The student union was incorporated into the PLO and its politics became intrinsically linked to the political development of the organisation.

The political transformation that characterised Pales-

tinian political life in the 1980s and 1990s negatively impacted on student activism. The process of “bureaucratisation” of the movement began in the 1980 obstructed grassroots activism, thus resulting in an unrivalled paralysis of social, cultural and political activities at the transnational level. The signing of the Oslo Peace Agreement temporarily interrupted Palestinian student activism. The “crisis of leadership, strategy and mode of politics” in the PLO and the fragmentation in the resistance movement, brought about by Oslo (Sayigh 1998), forced Palestinian new generation to elaborate a more articulated concept of identity in an attempt to overcome the deeper and more marked separation of interests imposed on Palestinian society, and to once more contribute to the political articulations of the national movement.

The analysis of PYM -as one attempt to revitalise Palestinian student politics transnationally- attests for new generations’ effort in this direction. The examination of PYM political vision and framework suggests that new generations of Palestinians are attempting re-articulating their claims within the original analytic of anti-colonialism pushing for different strategies based on Third World solidarity and cooperation among all oppressed people to achieve liberation. In doing so, Palestinian youth reclaim their role as vanguard in their struggle against oppression.

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