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Being Young in the Diaspora: Fragmentation of the Palestinian Youth Mobilisation from the Middle East to Europe

Fanny Christou¹

Abstract

While the current research mainly deals with the Palestinian youth in the Middle East, reports from various organisations, whose most accounts are descriptive, hardly provide a sustained and critical evaluation of their nature and impact. With an urgent need to understand better youth engagement in exile under adverse conditions in a conflict-ridden society such as the Palestinian one, this paper aims to analyse the Palestinian youth initiatives from the Middle-East (Lebanon, Syria and Palestine) to Europe (Sweden). Focusing on the Palestinian youth in the diaspora, this paper provides an analysis of the impact of migratory trajectories and activist backgrounds in regards to the evolution of the mobilisation's practices. Notwithstanding the stunning achievements of the Palestinian youth movement, this article investigates the fragmentation and even collapse of many of these types of engagement due to political and socio-cultural ruptures, throughout data collected in Sweden, and employing the youth engagement theoretical framework.

Keywords: *Palestinian youth; engagement; diaspora; identity; Sweden*

Introduction

In the Middle East, youth has been at the forefront of efforts to bring change as well as to provide relief in societies that had to endure brutal conflicts especially in the absence or lack of will from the state to provide essential services. Palestine, among other societies in the 'Global South', has experienced demographic changes but is also dealing with stagnation of its socio-political situation. As mentioned by Chatty (2009), "Palestinian refugee youth living both within and outside of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) camps in the Middle East [...] have been captive for stereotyping, and they have been objectified as passive victims" but they also "express a willingness to act to improve their situation as well as a cautious and measured optimism for their future". In 2015, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a ground-breaking resolution on Youth, Peace and Security (2250), symbolising a shift in the perception of youth as only seen in binary terms of either victim/perpetrator, to instead be regarded as active agents for peace and security.

To date, Palestinian youth has played a key role in the Palestinian national resistance to the Israeli occupation since the Nakba in 1948 and since 1967 in particular². With the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, youth leagues were established to

¹ Fanny Christou, PhD Affiliated / Associated researcher: Lund University, Sweden and Migrinter University of Poitiers, France
 Researcher: K3 School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University, Sweden. Email: fanny.christou@gmail.com.

² The Nakba / Catastrophe refers to the events of 1948 when Palestinians were displaced by the creation of the State of Israel. After the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War of 1967, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation began to ramp up its presence and the Palestinian nationalism then replaced the traditional Arab nationalism that had dominated Palestinian politics prior to 1967 (Nassar, 1997).



represent the Palestinian cause (Khoury-Machool, 2007). While the educational system, specifically, has been at the forefront of the Palestinian national struggle, the situation of the Palestinian youth is complex: they are the largest segment in society that is expected to affect the desired change sought by all Palestinians in the form of national unity, liberation and ending the occupation but youth does not receive adequate attention. On the other hand, while “Palestinian youth safeguarded a strong presence in the course of the Palestinian national struggle since the emergence of the Palestinian resistance and its control of the PLO in the late 1960s” (Hilal, 2016), the existence of geographical, socio-economic and political fragmentation may impact the various Palestinian youth initiatives and strategies of mobilisation in the diaspora due to the reality of belonging to heterogeneous groups and affiliations in terms of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital.

Against this background, this paper examines the plural ways of Palestinian youth to engage in politics in the diaspora, more specifically in Sweden, in order to question the Palestinian youth engagement reality under adverse conditions in a conflict-ridden and war-ravaged society such as the Palestinian one. Based on empirical data collected in Sweden between 2015-2017, where the Palestinians have been historically settled in (Author, 2019), this paper will investigate the role of the Palestinian youth initiatives, specifically in the diaspora, but will also explore the issues that can emerge in regards to the different agendas and backgrounds of these youth.

Semi-directed interviews with members of the Palestinian youth diaspora have been conducted in Sweden, as well as participant observation of community activities and events to reflect the heterogeneity of these initiatives. Additionally, an investigation based on digital ethnographic methods (Murthy, 2008) has been carried out, reflecting on how virtual media enable geographically distant individuals to come together to occupy new social spaces online but also to bring out personal strategies. Indeed, social media can provide space for exchange, particularly among youth, to create connections across divides and geographical distance. This article thus explores the changes in identity, perceptions and practices among Palestinians, particularly youth, that have made diasporic mobilisation an important space to negotiate a *Palestinianness* that needs to be understood in its diversity.

Theoretical background

This research employs a theoretical framework based on “youth engagement theories” in order to investigate the role youth initiatives play in the (re)construction of the Palestinian society. It will be used to examine the interactions of youth activities in order to interrogate the context in which they forge their engagement and the diversity of its purpose. In this respect, relevant literature suggests that “full engagement” consists of three components: cognitive (for instance, learning new things), affective (such as deriving pleasure from participating) and behavioural (for instance, spending time doing the activity) (Pancer et al., 2002). It is also widely assumed that youth engagement is conceptualised as the “act” of being engaged in activities in order to experience positive development impacts. Thus, youth engagement is scholarly well-documented (Cammarota, 2011; Cammarota & Fine 2008; Delgado, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Iwasaki, 2016; Rose-Krasnor et al., 2007; Zeldin, 2004) but one needs to also question processes, strategies and behaviours that define these youth initiatives in the diaspora.



Based on three testimonies collected in the Swedish town of Malmö, highlighting the emergence of different forms of Palestinian mobilisation as well as a plurality of identities in Sweden, this article will discuss the notion of Palestinian youth diaspora. Indeed, while having in common the period of birth (in the 1980s) and the gender, these Palestinian men were born in three different places: Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian occupied territories, thus having experienced various migratory routes and activist trajectories. In addition, while the youth is usually seen as a segment with a common youth identity in an a-historical category which does not change over time (Wyn, 2011: 35), the Palestinian case can help in approaching youth as heterogeneous group consistent with diversity.

Last but not least, while the concept of diaspora is useful to define the fluidity and the dynamism of the Palestinians' dispersion (Medam, 1993), it can also be articulated with the fluid definition of youth (Samuk et al., 2019: 3). But it has to take into consideration other scales of analysis, which are the multiplicity of centres of gravity, the crystallisation and polarisation of collective identity, the fragmentation of spaces and migration processes, the fragmented reproduction of activism trajectories and political ruptures.

The Palestinian youth initiatives from the Middle-East to Europe: the role of the Palestinian youth diaspora in Sweden

Narratives on Middle Eastern youth often centre on their civic participation as well as their socio- economic exclusion and marginalisation. Living under political pressure and through decades of political instability, youth in the region have struggled to fulfil their aspirations related to livelihood, social engagement, and political participation. Research on youth engagement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region provides useful insights into youth mobilisation and addresses engagement in societies with different social-historical trajectories, confronting various challenges and opportunity settings (El-Sharnouby, 2015; Amir-Moazami, 2010; Sika, 2018; Kurtz, 2012; Williams, 2016). Across the MENA region, youth face many obstacles to their full social and economic inclusion whereas they can be a source of regional economic prosperity and positive social change (MENA Youth Hub, 2017; UNESCO, 2011). The potential that young people have – either as agents of positive change or instability – was illustrated during the Arab uprisings. Despite being active drivers of change in the region, youth continue to struggle to secure social and economic inclusion in their communities. Youth often plays a key role in bringing about political and social change. But this is especially true in moments of crisis, where youth can provide a highly contested imaginary of a country's experiences and expectations.

There is a dearth of research focusing on the Palestinian civil society initiatives as well as on the role of the Palestinian youth in the Middle East (Ahmad, 2013; Attalah et al., 2013; Barber, 2001; Christophersen, 2016; Christophersen et al., 2012; Habashi, 2017; Havandjian, 2014; Hoigilt, 2013; Salih et al., 2017). A recent study based on a survey conducted in four locations of Palestinian presence, being in Mandatory/historical Palestine (West Bank, Gaza Strip and the areas occupied in 1948) as well as in Palestinian camps in Lebanon, reports that “the young Palestinian survey respondents said Palestinian life is currently associated with illusionary economic changes and developments”, explaining that these changes were associated with “the loss of land and homeland, and increased colonial control over the different communities” (Abdul Majeed, 2017: 38). Within this survey, the Palestinian youth highlights a skeptical attitude vis-à-vis the current situation, mentioning the consequences of the political

rupture and corruption. Between illusion and hope, a mosaic is formed primarily from pieces of pessimism and frustration about the extent of exclusion and isolation of the community at all levels.

However, there is an urgent need to take into account that an important part of the Palestinians is living outside the region. In this respect, the Palestinian mobility to Europe and in Sweden, in particular, can be considered as an important factor to redefine both politics and identities. As Salih et al. (2017) highlight, enlarging the scope of our analysis beyond national borders, can help in rearticulating the object/s at the core of the waves of “contentious politics” (Tilly 2008: 5) in the MENA region and exploring the various tactics, imaginaries and initiatives that transcend the Palestinian youth in the diaspora. Indeed, while in Palestine, “youth as well as development specialists and academics, emphasise that young people are absent from the processes of decision-making, community development and participation in building peace and achieving security” (UNFPA & PBSO, 2017), the question of its role in the diaspora remains unexplored.

Thus, the analysis of the role of the Palestinian youth mobilisation in exile, specifically in Sweden, can provide a better knowledge of the meaning of being young and Palestinian in the diaspora. Indeed, we cannot ignore the fact that youth does not mobilise exclusively within national borders but often operate through tactics, political cultures, forms of solidarity, imaginaries and networks that transcend them. In this respect, we report here three case studies of Palestinian youth forms of engagement that we have respectively entitled: conventional forms of political mobilisation, an individualised political mobilisation, and a silent mobilisation.

Palestinians from Lebanon and their conventional forms of political mobilisation

One of the leitmotifs that are often mentioned by Palestinians from Lebanon in Sweden refers to the right of return. To exemplify this, we can refer to a Palestinian man, originally from Lebanon, who was born in 1987 in the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp that we met in Sweden in 2015:

The main interest that we seek is going back to our homeland, it is not a State, it is not a democracy, it is not equality, it is anything of that. It is our rights, it is our homes, it is our land. [...] And I think whatever the cover is, whatever the big statement we work under, that would be the main embedded principles we seek or find out. I think also there is a difference between Palestinian activists – including me – and the Palestinian leadership at the moment. [...] I personally, and so many other Palestinians, have never been represented – my generation has never been represented – in the Palestinian political body. And hence we were never included in the decision-making process, from that I think the leadership purposes and our aims as Palestinian youth / societies are different.

The mobilisation of this young Palestinian man, whose grandparents were originally from Haifa in Palestine and exiled to Lebanon in 1948, following the Nakba, stems from his activist background with a politically strongly family engaged in Lebanon within political parties as well as social work. His mobilisation keeps on being developed in Sweden by maintaining contacts with Palestinian organisations in Lebanon but also through his involvement in various political initiatives in Sweden:



My activism or my work or my engagement in Sweden may have been altered or stopped for a while when I first came here because it takes time to find groups and the right people to work with. But I don't see activism or I don't see the engagement in the Palestinian cause disconnected from a space to another. I think the best way to do is to connect more and more groups together and to put demand under one umbrella, not maybe at the moment under one body, but under a network or under an umbrella that would unify them on the visible aims, with the different needs of societies.

Thus, Palestinian youth from Lebanon develops in Sweden strategies of mobilisation that aim to highlight a strong Palestinian identity, often referring to the traditional diasporic homeland, Palestine. This activism of Palestinians from Lebanon can be explained by different factors (Finchman, 2013), such as a sense of mobilisation in the refugee camps, where they have been often politically involved (PLO in Lebanon), but also a desire to be active in the new Swedish host country to face inequality and injustice they used to face.

Palestinians from Syria through an individualised political mobilisation

Palestinians from Syria do not often take part in collective activities and demonstrations in Malmö. Many of them prefer to use other tools of mobilisation such as social networks and media, which are platforms where they can sensibilise and mobilise for another kind of Palestinian agenda. They do support the Palestinian cause but they prefer to engage in the Syrian issue. Our encounter with a Palestinian man born in 1989 in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria, who went to Libya, came back to Syria, moved to Lebanon and arrived in Sweden in 2013 as a student, can highlight this mobilisation that does not deny a sense of solidarity towards the "Palestinian people" but refers to a new Palestinian identity:

Coming from Syria, as a Syrian born in Syria from a Syrian mother, studying in Damascus, meeting French students, there was a little part of me of Palestinianess, which is still present in my everyday life, but never as an identity. It was like an old belonging [...] but not really a sense of belonging. When I came here, I met Palestinians who are only Palestinians. This was a big shock for me.

Thus, while the strong degree of his parents' activism helped him in building his own engagement, he is not politically involved in Sweden, preferring other tools of communication regarding the role of the Palestinian youth. These mobilisation strategies can be understood by their articulation with the Syrian context, in which Palestinian refugees play a specific role in the 2011 uprising and conflict. This can be explained by the living conditions of the Palestinians in Syria as well as the desire to assert a local Syrian identity together with a Palestinian identity, as a result of the Palestinian mobilisation's evolution during the Syrian conflict (Legrand, 2012; Hasan, 2012).

Palestinians from the occupied territories and a silent mobilisation

Some scholars, such as Koinova (2013), argue that a violent context in the homeland could contribute to the development of an extremely strong mobilisation in the host country. However, Palestinians from the occupied territories often deal with a "silent mobilisation", based on music / artistic expression and individual practices. Although they were sometimes strongly mobilised in Palestine, their migration to Sweden has somewhat changed their activism.

Born in 1988, in the Jabaliya refugee camp in the Gaza strip, the third and last case refers to a young man who moved from Gaza to Egypt, went to Gaza again and finally reached Sweden in 2013 as a student. Strongly politically involved, he was active in Gaza fighting against the Israeli occupation and the political divisions in Palestine, which costed him some months in jail. In Sweden, he does not participate in any kind of demonstrations or activities related to Palestine but prefers to develop socio-cultural and artistic mobilisation based on music. Referring himself to a kind of “silent activism”, he says:

Unfortunately, I don't feel connected with these groups. Because for them it is the right of return, for us it is a bit deeper than that. [...] We want solutions, we want practical solutions. And this is why I feel like there is a gap. Ok, we share we are Palestinians, but I feel like there is ignorance on both sides. They don't know what is happening. So, I feel like they have changed the concept of the freedom fighter. I really feel that and this is why people from the outside, they romanticize the resistance, because they don't know that it is used as political tool. [...] Every political party uses that against the people. And to push their own agenda.

The Palestinian youth from the occupied territories argue that they have a better knowledge of the situation on the field. There, in Palestine, they were fighting for a different agenda. Indeed, while many Palestinians in Malmö are somehow demonstrating for more or less traditional issues (right of return, social justice, refugees' rights), Palestinians from the occupied territories highlight perspectives in regards to the internal political division they had to face in the homeland, with a “Palestinian spring that was not” (Høigilt, 2013). “Exhausted”, “hopeless”, they refer to another repertoire, trying to find an individual peace while living in Sweden. Thus, the analysis of the degree of violence in the homeland in order to understand the degree of mobilisation (Koinova, 2013) should additionally include the variety of migration spaces, causes, conditions and places of violence irruption in order to interrogate the ways Palestinians mobilise.

Analysis of the impact of migratory trajectories and activist backgrounds vis-à-vis the evolution of the mobilisation's practices

The emergence of these forms of Palestinian youth mobilisation in Sweden is channelled by different players detached from any unique visible cause. In this respect, contestation has become individualised in Sweden with a variety of Palestinian motives for contestation. The trend is also towards broadening the repertory of action of the Palestinian youth in the diaspora, dealing both with traditional concerns (right of return, collective memory) and a new socio-political agenda that goes beyond any State framework and that is dissociated from the “Question of Palestine”. The latter phenomenon includes refugees pressing a “right to exile” to escape Lebanon, or mobilising “for Syria” from their European exile. We, therefore, witness the emergence of modes of contestation that, even while they vary depending on what activist resources, migration trajectories and individual backgrounds they mobilise, display especially distinctive mechanics.

Indeed, Palestinians in exile do not only refer to a unique homeland but deal with a multiplicity of centres of gravity. They refer to different “homes”, linked to different political agendas. Whereas Palestinian mobilisation used to conform to political agendas, specifically regarding Palestinian nationalism and struggle, today the diversity of youth practices in the diaspora marks a rupture with the conventional political repertoire. While the Oslo and Madrid



Accords have refocused the Palestinian mobilisation in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip by establishing a peace process, they have, in fact, signed the emergence of an “exploded mosaic” (Dot-Pouillard, 2016).

As a consequence, the Palestinians' concerns have been shifted. This is reflected in different fragmentations: the political fragmentation of Palestinian structures (internal divisions Fatah / Hamas) and the territorial fragmentation (growing dispersion of Palestinians in the Middle East and beyond). This double fragmentation contributes to increasing the gap between Palestinians from within (in Palestine) and those from outside (where the Palestinian question is constantly instrumentalized), creating a mutation of the Palestinian mobilisation repertoire in the diaspora.

These rapid changes in the Palestinian interior, with still unclear contours and unpredictable becoming, lead to “a (re) definition of the Palestinian exterior and its roles” (Al-Husseini and Signoles, 2011: 32). In this respect, exploring the Palestinian youth mobilisation in Sweden illustrates how Palestinians, in the diaspora and without any kind of Arabic lever, try to get rid of the sterile Oslo Accords framework³. The post-Oslo period marks the rise of a generation that develops conventional and non-conventional forms of protest, giving a new sense to the Palestinian activism, that is well-highlighted by our Palestinian interviewee from Lebanon:

I think the problem that Palestinian face today is that we lost our political body, our state like body that used to be called PLO, after Oslo agreement. The PLO was the very representative body and if you have a look at its structure, executive and legislative structures represent all Palestinians all over the world. [...] Palestinian activism, in general, is so individualistic at the moment. But maybe individualism is not the right word. There are Palestinian activist groups all over the world or all over Europe that seek to network with each other, but yet, it is still missing a structure that withholds all this activism within one body that transforms it into political change. [...] That, of course, is explained by the Palestinian political division that is very obvious these days, that can be characterised by the Fatah Hamas division, but it is also spread out all over the world with the loss of unity between the Palestinian political activists. [...] I think that Palestinian activism in general, in Sweden, became a very elitist movement, that is kind of disconnected from the society. Organisations in Sweden are driven by political organisations like Fatah and Hamas or the PLFP, and unfortunately these political factions have not been able to mobilise again in the society for so many reasons that again can be connected to the loss of the political

³ The Oslo Accords were signed in 1993 and marked the first negotiated agreement between the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel, inaugurating a new chapter of Palestinian politics that saw drastic changes in the national movement's structures, functions, perceptions, and political vocabulary and behaviour (Shweiki, 2012, Dana, 2019). These accords have been the subject of lively political and intellectual controversy (Guignard ve Seurat, 2020), some finding in them reason to rejoice in the advance towards self-determination (Khalidi, 1997), others considering the Accords a capitulation (Said, 2001). Resulting from internal and external factors (Le More, 2008), the Oslo accords contributed to strengthen the development of mobilisation structures in exile and the “Oslo Palestine” (Salingue, 2014) rhymes with territorial, administrative and legal fragmentation. With the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in the early 1990s, the PLO's critical role in organising and representing the diaspora diminished dramatically and this political vacuum in diaspora representation brought about the growth of initiatives undertaken outside of Palestine. This renewed activism was characterised by the rise of Palestinian political involvement in Western countries, and Palestinian marginalisation in Arab countries, but is also representative of the heterogeneous experiences and trajectories of the second and even third generation of Palestinian diaspora (Labadi, 2018).

body of Palestinians, or can also be connected to not giving a space for the youth to lead their ways and live on their own ways. (Palestinian from Lebanon)

Thus, Palestinian youth develop different initiatives, strategies, and projects of mobilisation in Sweden to voice a collective culture of resistance. However, their different backgrounds can be at the roots to explain the individual acts of negotiating a plural Palestinian identity. Although the existence of strong ties among Palestinians in Sweden, based on a wide range of organisations, foster continued identification with the homeland and a collective participation into the Swedish agenda, the individual markers and narratives that appear consequently to the migration process can become vehicles for an individual process of engagement in the host country. Palestinians have experienced different migration trajectories that have created ruptures in terms of mobilisation. This spatial fragmentation highlights a polarisation of the diaspora, politically fragmented due to diverse activism trajectories, thus providing a plural sense of belonging. We can then argue that a re-invention of the Palestinian political identity is perceptible in the distance.

Conclusion: The Palestinian youth diaspora towards the fragmentation and even collapse of many of these engagement types due to political and socio-cultural ruptures.

Through these empirical cases, the mobilisation of the Palestinian youth diaspora deals with multiple Palestinian identities that one can consider as a point of departure for re-imagining Palestinian politics and future vision, remarking the expression of political narratives then contributing to deconstruct the romanticised and polarised perception of the Palestinian struggle. The extension of the political sphere towards new outside spheres creates the desacralisation and normalisation of Palestinian relationships to the political centre of gravity. (Guignard ve Seurat, 2020). They are thus based on: the inclusion of less politicised everyday realms and less romanticised realities, the non-formal spheres of participation and negotiation of identity, the social dynamics of diasporisation, and the individual trajectories.

The Palestinian Outside is also a political space whose existence outstrips the social dynamic of diasporisation (Kodmani-Darwish, 1994), giving rise to unprecedented individual trajectories and institutional reorganisations in which the Palestinian youth in exile plays an important role. The fluidity and the diversity of these multitudes of Palestinian fragments draw from multiple political configurations rebuilt in exile, thus contributing to thinking through what “distance” consists of; what modes it is redefined through; and the resources that can be mobilized, or are available, to exchange between the centre and its peripheries.

In this respect, as Brubaker (2005) mentions, rather than speaking of ‘a diaspora’ or ‘the diaspora’ as an entity, it may be more fruitful and precise to speak of diasporic projects, claims, or practices. In other words, these new Palestinian youth forms of mobilisation in the diaspora contribute to creating the desacralisation and normalisation of Palestinians’ relationship to the political and to their respective political authorities. They also invite us not to neglect the impact of social mobility, migratory trajectories, generational and activist effects, and the reformulation of social links and values that are distinctive to Oslo-era Palestinian society, when Palestinian political factions and the civil society used to historically constitute the key source of leadership, mobilisation, orientation and organisation (El Kurd, 2019; Dana, 2019). Thus, the plurality of the Palestinian youth mobilisation in Sweden creates a diaspora’s



diaspora, contributing to deep reformulations of the sites and modes of expression of Palestinians in exile.

Spatially distanced, space-oriented and politically fragmented, the Palestinian youth mobilisation in Sweden endorses a plurality of meanings. While the Palestinians are often rooted in a conceptual homeland and a catastrophic *leitmotiv* as a victim diaspora dealing with a collective sense of belonging, the Palestinian youth case-study in Sweden highlights the necessity to deconstruct traditional approaches of youth engagement in the diaspora by taking into consideration: the impact of migratory trajectories and relations to spaces, activism experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds, and processes of socialisation. In addition, this case-study traduces a need to unpack the notion of context for diaspora mobilisation: contexts are not only host-states in which diasporas live and original home-states to which they are supposed to be collectively and transnationally connected.

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