

Resilience and Hope: Youth and Peacebuilding in Palestine

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Today's younger generations of Palestinians desperately need to become more engaged in community peacebuilding activities to end the division of Palestinian society.

The engagement of the younger generation in civil society work to promote peacebuilding concepts and practices at both grassroots and political levels is necessary for restoring order and security in societies divided by conflict and violence. This is particularly true of Gaza in Palestine where the inhabitants live in an environment where there is violence, extreme poverty and a lack of freedom.

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Palestinian youth and civil society face many challenges related to the harsh circumstances imposed by a lack of peace, security and economic development since the failure of the so called 'Peace Process' in 2000 between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel. There have, however, been a variety of projects and programmes installed to raise youth awareness and the importance of civil society values and practices to achieve human rights, peacebuilding and good governance that help bring hope to a young generation, despite some of the local cynicism.

Cynicism towards youth

I always remember the cynical questions raised by many Palestinian citizens while engaging in civil society activities at different levels: "What kind of civil society under occupation are you talking about?" "How will civil society promote and advocate the values of peacebuilding under a territory experiencing foreign occupation?" There are still some Palestinian intellectuals, leaders and activists who do not believe in education for peacebuilding in a country under occupation, but they believe strongly in community peacebuilding to restore the order and security of their own society, after years of division and the failure of the 'peace process'.

They also go beyond just cynicism and move into absolute pessimism and defeatism by asking: "How can empowering youth in peacebuilding be effective, while they still suffer from the violence under Israeli occupation and a lack of freedom?" "How will civil society organisations promote and persuade youth to become engaged in activities while an overwhelming majority are poor, jobless and losing hope in the future?"

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An example is often raised that during the last five years, several young people committed suicide in the Gaza Strip, owing to the harsh economic and social circumstances. This society, however, has little experience of suicide, as it is known for its spirit of religious education and social solidarity, which have always prevailed and are considered to be the highest in the region.

Cynics believe that talking about the empowerment of youth involvement in peacebuilding activities in Gaza is a matter of 'idealism' and 'luxury', a waste of resources and time because they see such pursuits as being only achievable through concurrently obtaining freedom and national independence in a viable Palestinian state. Cynics often point out that there were many peacebuilding activities implemented in the Green Line between 1995 and 2000.

Many Palestinian citizens from the various health, NGOs and environmental sector participated at capacity building development courses inside the Green Line. They enjoyed education, trips and nice food, but not sustained peace or security, as the main cause of the problems, the need to establish of a Palestinian state, had not yet been solved. These activities passed without any glimpse of hope or peace after the failure of the 'peace process' that led to the breakout of various cycles of violence including the latest war in the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014 and changed both the context and style of life, after massive destruction.

Life Style

Image credit: [UN Photo/Flickr](#).

The Palestinian people are used to the daily life style of suffering and the absence of human security; they lost their top priority of securing their own basic human, needs during the failure of the 2000 'peace process' and the collective punishment policies exercised by the occupation. They have lost their own economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, political and human security. In 1994, the UNDP defined human security, which is achieved when people can exercise their choices safely and freely, and when they can be relatively confident that the opportunities they have today will not be entirely lost tomorrow.

The Gazan people cannot plan their own day without any interruption, owing to the circumstances imposed by a lack of electricity, pollution and a devastated economy. As Mohammed Srour, a field researcher at a human rights organisation in Gaza says

“ “The Palestinian people now busy with their own daily affairs, living without electricity and facing the entire closure on the strip and the invasion of pollution of their environment and beaches, owing to the lack of electricity. The citizens have no place to go in Gaza to escape the heat of the summer because of the lack of electricity. The sewage flows into the sea as the pumps and wasting stations do not work without electricity. The beaches are fully polluted and people cannot enjoy swimming in the sea to escape from the extreme heat any more in most coastal areas”. ”

Gaza's economy has actually been *virtually stagnant* for the past ten years, with an average annual real GDP growth rate over the decade not exceeding 1.44%, while Gaza's population has grown by 38.4% over the same period.

Today's younger generations of Palestinians desperately need to become more engaged in community peacebuilding activities to end the division of Palestinian society. But the dire circumstances have deepened the wounds of Gazan society and made the life of the younger generation almost unbearable

and impossible. Consequently, many young Palestinians have decided to leave rather than stay and help build peace.

The Brain Drain of Palestinian Youth

Many young minds have already left Palestine to find a new environment and hope. More than 21 young people who attempted to find their way to Europe lost their lives in the Mediterranean in 2014 when one of their boats was wrecked and their fate is still unknown to this day. However, the rest of the youth who could not leave after the full closure of the tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Egypt spend their time navigating social media and the internet.

They enjoy their chats which help them escape from the harsh politics and economic realities, attempting to watch any developments posted by other fellows or friends online. Facebook, in particular, is considered their own ideal 'city' of information and it is a way of 'killing the time', as many young people are always informing me when I have a conversation with them. They have lost hope in local politicians, political groups, the international community and civil society organisations in helping them to change their circumstances. There are many who accuse these actors of lying, trading off and using the suffering of the Gazans to increase their power, wealth and business. But not all have abandoned hope.

Resilience and Hope

Despite the seemingly dire straits of life, the youths of Palestine are still resilient enough to try change the de facto situation, by engaging in community initiatives. They have, for example, on different occasions, engaged in non-violent and peaceful protests to contribute to the ending of the circumstances

in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. For example, the [youth march movement](#) in 2012 during 'the Arab Spring' to end the Palestinian division. After 2014 war in Gaza, they also participated actively, in non-violent activities to end the siege in the Gaza Strip by protesting close to the 'buffer zone' or in front of the 'security fence' with Israel in the Gaza Strip.

Now, in 2017, the Palestinian youth, across their homeland, have seized the initiative again to [protest peacefully](#) against the closure of Al Aqsa. They are still seeking a better future and attempting to find any opportunity for hope and change. They attempt to find out about the latest leaks of reconciliation between Hamas and a Fatah wing in the Gaza Strip to end the conflict between the two sides that has divided the Palestinian house. If reconciliation takes place between the two sides, it will contribute to changing the social and political circumstances of the entire society and of youth in particular.

In addition to these political developments, there have been a number of community activities to help keep youth hopeful for a better future. For example, the Gaza youth UNRWA Football team that won the Norway Cup last year continued preparation and already left the Strip for Denmark and Norway to participate in two different [international football tournaments](#) in the last week of July and the First week of August. This kind of participation always gives youth and the whole society hope that there is still a bright future coming soon where they can achieve justice, peace and freedom.

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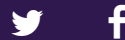
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