

Children of the Palestinian intifada: The lost generation

By Steven Erlanger

Sunday, March 11, 2007

NABLUS, West Bank: Their worried parents call them the lost generation of Palestine: its most radical, most accepting of violence, and most despairing.

They are the children of the second intifada that began in 2000, growing up in a territory riven by infighting, seared by violence, occupied by Israel, largely cut off from the world and segmented up by barriers and checkpoints.

To hear these young people talk is to listen in on budding nihilism and a loss of hope.

"Ever since we were little, we see guns and tanks, and little kids wanting little guns to fight against Israel," said Raed Debie, 24, a student at An Najah University here.

Issa Khalil, 25, broke in, agitated. "We never see anything good in our lives," he said. He was arrested for throwing stones in the first intifada, the uprising of mass civil disobedience that began in the late 1980s and led to the 1993 Oslo accord with Israel. He was arrested again in the second uprising as the agreement faltered.

"And for what?" he asked. "I wasted 14 years of my life, we all did. For five years I haven't left Nablus. Here there's unemployment and no peace; it retreats, we go backward."

While generations of young Palestinians have grown up stateless, seething at Israel as the visible agent of oppression, this generation is uniquely stymied.

Israeli checkpoints, barriers and closures, installed by Israelis trying to protect their own citizens from Palestinian suicide bombers, have lowered their horizons, shrunk their Palestine and taken away virtually any informal interaction with outsiders, let alone with ordinary Israelis. The security measures have become even tighter since the election to power a year ago of the Islamist group Hamas, which preaches eternal "resistance" to Israeli occupation and rejects Israel's right to permanent existence on this land.

During most of the 1980's and 90's, as many as 150,000 Palestinians came into Israel daily to work, study and shop. And while they were not treated as equals, many learned Hebrew and established relationships. Now, the only Israelis Palestinians see are armed soldiers and settlers. The West Bank is cut into three parts by checkpoints and permits; Gazan men under 30 are virtually unable to leave their tiny, poor and overcrowded territory. Few talk of peace, only of a lifetime of "resistance."

Many Israelis agree that the current generation of young Palestinians have been thoroughly radicalized, but say it is the product of Palestinian political and religious leaders who have sanctioned and promoted violence and terrorism against Israel. Palestine is an overwhelmingly youthful place 56.4 percent of Palestinians are under 19, and in Gaza, 75.6 percent of the population is under 30, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Opinion polls show a generation more supportive of armed struggle and terrorism than their parents, according to Waleed Ladadweh of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. The violence is not only directed toward Israel but toward one another. " We're pushed all the time to be more political, more militant, more religious, more extreme," said Shadi el-Haj, a 20-year-old student at An Najah. "We want to be Palestinians, like the generation of the first intifada. But people push you, are you Fatah or Hamas? All our problems start with, I'm Fatah, I'm Hamas. It wasn't like that before."

During the first intifada the young were a symbol of the struggle for statehood, leaders of a popular uprising that focused, at least at first, on resistance over violence. But in the brutal struggle of the second intifada, which has been taken over by the militias, many of them controlled from leaders outside Palestine, "now the youth are irrelevant," said Nader Said, a political scientist at Birzeit University in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

More importantly, this generation has lost faith in political solutions. "They haven't lived one moment in a period of real hope for a real state," he said. "And with this internal fighting, there is more and more a feeling that we don't deserve a state, that we're inadequate, which kills the morale of the young."

Some 58 percent of those under 30, the center's polls show, expect a more violent struggle with Israel over the next five to 10 years, and only 22 percent believe that there will be a peaceful negotiated solution between Israel and the Palestinians. Some 48 percent believe such an agreement is impossible, and 20 percent more believe it will only come "in a few generations."

There are no comparable polling figures from the late 1980's, when the first intifada broke out. But in 2000, according to polling done by the center, only 32 percent of Palestinians between 18 and 30 believed there would be conflict and violence with Israel in the next five to 10 years. Some 21 percent thought there would be more peace, while 16 percent thought there would be less. Those older than 30 expected more peace and less conflict.

In 2000 only 7 percent of all Palestinians and only 6 percent of those 18 to 30 identified themselves as favoring Hamas. Forty-six percent and 47 percent of those 18 to 30 favored Fatah. Today, after a difficult year of Hamas rule, the two factions are roughly equal. Among those 18 to 30, the spread is wider, with 36 percent favoring Fatah and 27 percent Hamas.

Zakariya Zubeidi grew up imbued with what he sees as the heroism of the first intifada, built on hope and the conviction that sacrifice was bringing a state and a better future. Now he runs the Al Aksa Brigades in the tough town of Jenin and is wanted by Israel for carrying out attacks against Israelis.

"It was always our choice to be fuel for the struggle," he said. "But our problem now is that the car burns the youth as fuel but doesn't move. There's a problem in the engine, in the head. These kids are willing to be fuel, but many have been burned as waste."

Zubeidi was a hero of the first intifada. "When I was younger I thought, if I die, that's natural, it's for a cause," he said. "And today I think differently. To die? For what? For these people who can't agree? That's what this generation fears. It's lost, and its sacrifices are meaningless. Is the Palestinian dream dying? In these circumstances, yes."

The Youngest Ones

In Gaza's Nuseirat refugee camp, in an apartment along the rutted main road unpaved after the halt of American aid to the Palestinian Authority, Najwa and Taher el-Assar brood about their three children, Mustafa, 6, Ahmed, 5, and newborn Salma.

"The boys have become so violent in the way they think," she said. "In a way, they're no longer children." She described how she and Taher watched the news last summer of the shelling on a Gaza beach that left a family dead, a tragedy Israel denied causing but could not explain. "I feel that time stopped," she said. "And then days later, Mustafa says, 'I want to be fat, mommy.' And why? 'Because I want to put on a suicide belt and not have the Israelis see it,' he said."

"I was shocked," Assar said. "But it's in the news, the environment, the Israeli operations, the sound of the Apaches and the F-16s and the cannons. It all affects them, and they get nervous. Ahmed is very violent with his brother, he has no patience, he doesn't like to share, and I have to watch him all the time."

For the Eid festival, the boys asked for toy Kalashnikovs and Uzis. "They classify the weapons, they want a particular gun. And when you think of the violence, and what future will we have here? It will be a very violent future."

Taher broke in. "The world is moving ahead and we're moving backward," he said. "We're back to 1948."

Najwa said softly: "I feel there is no way I can protect them or hide them. Normally people are happy with a new baby, but when I delivered Salma I thought, 'Oh my God, a third child in this life.' It haunts me - I think, 'What if? What if? What if a rocket hits the house? What if the Israelis have another "accident"? What if Mustafa is 19 and attracted to a group of militants and I don't know, and I hear on TV that this person went to Israel and exploded himself?' You live with this, 'What if?' But there's no inner peace, you get so nervous you want to scream!"

Taher said: "But we can't give them security and safety. They can't live as normal children. When a kid realizes a parent can't supply security and safety, what is the point of these parents?"

Najwa said: "They understand our anxieties, even when we're silent." She tries to explain Israeli sonic booms to the boys as the flatulence of a plane that eats too much, she said. "Yet I become more scared than they do. And they feel it. I hug them to comfort them and I'm the one taking comfort from them!"

Mustafa and Ahmed played with new umbrellas, one printed with Disney characters and one with cats and dogs. They ran in and out of the sitting room. Then they came in, conspiratorial. Watch, they insisted, then pressed the buttons on the umbrellas, which expanded suddenly and flew into the air. "Qassams!" they shouted gleefully, referring to the crude bombs Palestinian militants shoot into Israel. "Qassams!"

The Hothouse of Gaza

In another part of the refugee camp, four black-clad fighters gathered in self-conscious secrecy, members of the Abu Rish brigades, a militant Gazan offshoot of the Fatah movement that opposes the Oslo accords with Israel and has moved closer to Hamas.

Raed, 30, was arrested in the first intifada, when he was 16. He felt a hero, then, but the political result, the 1993 Oslo accords, "were useless and benefited Israel," he said. "No one can resist with stones or build a nation without violence."

Like his comrades, he says he is fighting for the future of his own children, but he has small hopes for them, and large fears. "Hamas and Fatah are so divided, the goal of Palestine disappears," he said. "I talk about willing my children to be martyrs for Allah, but I honestly wish for them to be safe and healthy, that's all."

There is bravado there, but also frustration. None of the fighters, who agreed to talk if their last names were not published, believes a Palestinian state will be established; none can imagine living next to Israel. All of them want to leave and start again, somewhere.

Gaza is a tiny, poor, chaotic place of 1.5 million people, 70 percent of them refugees or their descendants. Younger, more conservative and more religious than the West Bank, Gaza is the heartland of Hamas, and the people of Gaza are even more constrained by Israeli and Egyptian security restrictions on their travel. There are fewer jobs than in the West Bank, and even more weapons.

With the economy of Gaza shutting down, much of the work available for young people is either in the swollen and disorganized security forces or in the armed militias or gangs, many of them built on clan loyalties, and some of which engage more in racketeering than in fighting. Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with considerable financial help from Iran and Syria, are known at least to pay their people, even if Hamas cannot pay full salaries to all Palestinian Authority employees.

Hassan, 21, ran out of money before finishing university, but can't imagine what he would do in Gaza with a degree. "I look at the graduates here, and their diplomas are useless," he said. "That's why I'm in the resistance."

According to the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, about 19 percent of those killed since 2000 have been 18 or under, whether in fighting against the Israelis or among Palestinian factions.

Mirvat Massoud was 18, the first child in her family to go to university, when she decided last November to blow herself up. The Israeli army had taken over Beit Hanun, a town in northern Gaza, and was interrogating its inhabitants, looking for weapons, militants and those who fire Qassam rockets into Israel.

Inspired by a 2004 suicide attack carried out in Ashdod, Israel, by her cousin, Nabil, on behalf of Fatah's Al Aksa Martyrs Brigades, Mirvat volunteered to become a suicide bomber for the group. She was close to Nabil, who lived upstairs in Jabaliya refugee camp and was only a year older. The group declined her offer, however, saying that one young "martyr" in a family was enough. They told her father, Amin Massoud, a long-time Fatah member, who said he was shocked.

"I spoke to her of course," said Massoud, agitated, moving his hands through the empty air. "I said, 'Your education will be jihad. Going to school is jihad. If you become a doctor, that's jihad.' But I don't know what drove her - too much faith inside her, I don't know."

But the wall above Mirvat's desk is still covered with "martyr posters" from the dead of Jabaliya camp, and her parents knew she was becoming more religious and politically obsessed. She was enraged by reports of a van of schoolchildren hit by shrapnel in Beit Hanun and she slipped away.

She volunteered again, successfully this time, for Islamic Jihad. She died, lightly wounding two Israelis. Far away to the north, in Jenin, Suhaila Badawi, 20, knows every detail of Mirvat's story. She sees her both as familiar and as a model, a symbol of bravery for young Palestinian women and a tragedy, too. "I wouldn't commit such an act, but I understand her completely and I admire her," Badawi said. "She was a Palestinian like me. I don't think she was misled."

Khader Fayyad, 46, lives in Beit Hanun and works as an ambulance driver for the Palestinian Red Crescent, dispatched to every horror. "I call these kids the destroyed generation," Fayyad said. Nobody pays attention to this generation, except to recruit them, and it's very dangerous."

He is proud of 16-year-old Ayman, the brightest of his sons. But he feels unable to provide him a valuable future.

Fayyad's own father died when he was 17. But it was a different time, he said the peace talks, the Oslo accords, the return of responsibility to Palestinians over their lives, Camp David. "We were exposed to the world, to politics, and yes, to Israelis," he said.

"Resistance and politics must go together," he said. "Yasser Arafat knew how to use one for the other. Now, there is no politics, no talks, so the sacrifices of the youth are wasted and empty."

Ayman, however, like most of his generation, cannot imagine living in peace next to an Israel that has ripped up his town, or becoming friends with an Israeli who has rolled over his schoolyard in a tank. "Israel should leave this land," he said angrily, then repeats what's he's taught, that all of Palestine belongs to Muslims. "The Jews should go back to where they came from, to Europe, Russia and America. They have no place here." Israel breaks all its agreements, Ayman insists. "How can you make peace with them?" he asks. "Even the Koran says there will be war with them until the day of judgment."

Yet Fayyad believes that this generation is still malleable, immature. "You can influence them though realistic solutions," he said. "If you delivered a real, two-state solution, believe me, they would go into the streets and dance. But if nothing changes, believe me also, they are lost - lost to all of us."

Leaving

Where once young Palestinians dreamed of staying to build a new state, now many are giving up, and scheming to get out.

Moayyed Haj Hussein is 22, educated and well-spoken. But after he failed to find a job in six months, his mother pressed his brother-in-law to give him work in a coffee shop near the Hawara checkpoint, which the Israeli army uses to control who comes in and out of Nablus.

The Assanabel café is a simple place, offering decent Turkish coffee, mint tea, schwarma and sweets like kanafi to the many Palestinians who wait for hours to get through the checkpoint. For Hussein, the café has become a kind of soft prison, giving him some spending money but no prospect for a future.

He graduated in computer sciences seven months ago from An Najah in Nablus, where he lives. But he sleeps here in Hawara, because as a male under 30 with a Nablus ID card, it's very difficult to get permission to exit the city to the south.

Hussein says he has never spoken to a normal Israeli. "The only Israelis I see here are either settlers or soldiers," he said. "They all have guns."

He hates waiting on people and washing dishes, and says he is still looking for a decent job. But he's also looking to get out of Palestine to the United States, if possible, where his sister lives, but "almost any place," he said, "where I can work and live a normal life." He's a Palestinian patriot, he insists. "But there's no hope here," he said. "You see the situation. It's useless to think it will improve. You see it, it just gets worse."

According to Nader Said's polls for Birzeit University, 35 percent of Palestinians over the age of 18 want to emigrate. Nearly 50 percent of those between 18 and 30 would leave if they could, said Said. "That's a huge indicator," he said. "In the worst of times here, when Israeli troops were everywhere, the figure in the population was less than 20 percent."

Palestinians talk about how they seem to be welcome in Cuba or China, now that it's hard for them to get permission to go work in the Gulf or Jordan. Others say it's possible upon arrival in some European countries, like Norway or Sweden, to ask for humanitarian asylum. But first they need a visa to get there.

Some travel agents in Gaza sell fictitious invitations from foreign hosts in Cuba, China and elsewhere, along with fake visas and hotel bookings to go along with real and expensive air tickets through Cairo.

Even the young fighters of the Abu Rish brigade have tried to leave. Muhammad and Saado, both 27, sold their weapons, took bank loans and paid \$2,000 for visas and tickets from Cairo to Beijing on Austrian Airlines. They made it out of Gaza through the Rafah crossing with Egypt, but the Egyptians put them into a bus, locked the door and drove straight to the airport. For the four days before their departure, they said, the Egyptians then locked them into a crammed airport waiting room.

"A dog wouldn't use the toilet," Muhammad said. "They charged us 150 Egyptian pounds a day (\$26.30) to use a seat, even the little kids. One Egyptian said, 'Even a dead body has to pay.'" They bribed guards to bring them food and water. The day of their flight, a Friday, they were brought to the departure hall. But an airlines security guard examined their documents and turned them away. Presumably, the visas were fake. "He looked at us as if we were evil," Saado said. "There was no respect for us. I hate the Israelis, but I hate the Egyptians more."

They were returned to the fetid waiting room, and a day later, when there was a busload, they were shipped back, first to El Arish. There they waited for days in an even more disgusting detention area, they said, until the Rafah crossing opened. At Rafah, they said, there was no order or dignity.

"When we finally got back to Gaza, I kissed the soil," Muhammad said, laughing at his humiliation. "We said, 'Gaza is paradise!'" In his own quest to get out, Hussein has contacted the American Consulate in East Jerusalem. But, he said, "I can't get a permit to go to Jerusalem to make an application."

What about those who would accuse you of giving up your rights in your land? Hussein turned away.

"I don't care," he finally said. "I want to live happily."