

New Solidarity Among Palestinians Creates Fresh Challenge for Israel

Long dispersed and facing differing issues, Palestinians find common purpose and new voices, like that of a 23-year-old Instagram star

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JERUSALEM— Muna el-Kurd’s campaign against Israeli plans to evict her family and neighbors from east Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood has turned the 23-year-old into a social-media star, with more than a million Instagram followers.

Triggered in part by this neighborhood standoff, the latest round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict raged for 11 days across Gaza, Israel and the West Bank. Ms. Kurd and fellow activists call it a new kind of Palestinian uprising. While Friday’s cease-fire between Israel and the militant group Hamas stopped the airstrikes and rockets, protests go on across the Palestinian territories and among Israel’s Arab citizens.

“Israel was able to divide us. But now, after the events of this month, there are no more borders between us—we are all united as Palestinians,” Ms. Kurd said.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has continued for generations. The latest round is producing something new. It has brought together Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel in ways unseen since 1948, the year of Israel’s creation. Without providing unanimity on solutions, the moment is giving rise to new voices, such as Ms. Kurd’s. It has unleashed new energy among young Palestinians across the region as they seek a fresh approach to the future. That presents fresh challenges for Israel, especially if voices like Ms. Kurd’s, who advocates an end to the Jewish state, grow in prominence.

“All the solutions based on compromising over Palestinian rights are falling apart,” said Soheir Asaad, a lawyer in the Israeli city of Haifa who defends Israel’s Arab citizens detained in recent unrest. Ms. Asaad helped coordinate a Palestinian general strike Tuesday—the first to occur throughout historic Palestine in several decades.

Different political status has long divided Palestinian communities. Some 2 million Palestinians within Israel enjoy full citizenship rights in theory, though they often suffer discrimination in practice, and most vote for Arab parties in the Knesset.

The 2 million Palestinians in Gaza live under Hamas, which is considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the European Union. Israel and Egypt control Gaza’s external borders, and have imposed harsh restrictions on the movement of people and many goods.

Three million more Palestinians live in the West Bank, under Israeli military occupation, where most population centers are administered by the Palestinian

Authority. That number includes some 350,000 in east Jerusalem, which Israel separated from the West Bank and annexed in 1980. They hold Israeli identity cards and are eligible to apply for citizenship, though the majority haven't.

This month's conflagration, combined with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's steady embrace of the Jewish far right, has infused these communities with a sense of shared purpose. "Common oppression has led to the creation of a unified struggle," said Mustafa Barghouti, a former Palestinian Authority minister of information who heads a party called National Initiative.

To Ms. Kurd and her fellow supporters, the way forward is clear.

"We want all of Palestine, from the river to the sea," she said as a group of Jewish settlers walked, under police protection, in front of her home. "There is no such thing called Israel."

Such a demand was the bedrock of Palestinian, and Arab, politics in the early decades after Israel was established on most of what was British-mandate Palestine.

It was only following the 1993 Oslo accord that Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization and the Arab League accepted a two-state solution, with a future Palestinian state limited to Gaza and the West Bank.

Opinion polls show that just over 40% in the West Bank and Gaza have consistently backed a two-state solution, a share that is similar among Israel's citizens.

The divide is as much generational as political. The maximalism of some Palestinian youth alarms older Palestinians who witnessed previous rounds of

bloodshed and have invested their lives in trying to find peace through compromise.

“Today, we’re opening a very painful wound. It’s now black and white, Arabs and Jews. Hate, resentment, fear, no trust and no leadership,” said Mahdi Abdul-Hadi, a veteran of dialogue with Israelis who runs a think-tank in east Jerusalem, the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs.

“It will not stop. We don’t have a Martin Luther King in Palestine, or in Israel,” he said.

Some of the young Palestinians’ expectations are dangerously naive, according to Yossi Beilin, an Israeli left-wing politician who was a key architect of the Oslo peace process as deputy foreign minister at the time.

“It’s totally unrealistic. Israel is the strongest military power in this region, and it’s not going to give up on itself,” he said. “I, as a liberal Israeli who wants peace, I will fight for my life against a one-state solution.”

A single state that would open its gates to millions of descendants of Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and beyond—a common Palestinian demand—would inevitably turn Israeli Jews into a minority with little political power and limited ability to protect themselves. That is a scenario only a tiny fringe of Israeli Jews find acceptable, given the history of the conflict.

The new uprising isn’t just against Israel but also against the Palestinian Authority leadership, which is seen by many protesters as corrupt and tainted by collaboration.

By contrast, Hamas, which fired more than 4,000 rockets toward Israeli cities in the past two weeks, is basking in newfound admiration among many Palestinians who don't share its Islamist ideology or live under its iron rule in Gaza.

“The mere fact that somebody is able to stand up to Israel without being crushed is something new because the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the history of defeats,” said Ghassan Khatib, a Palestinian pollster who teaches at Birzeit University in the West Bank and isn't a Hamas supporter. “This is good for morale.”

Celebrations erupted across the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza on Friday after the cease-fire took hold. In the 11 days of fighting, Israel had waged a deadly air campaign targeting Hamas's fighters, weapons factories and about 60 miles of its tunnel networks.

According to the United Nations, 242 Palestinians died in the coastal strip, including 66 children, and Gaza's civilian infrastructure suffered a severe blow. Rocket and missile attacks from Gaza killed 12 people in Israel, including 2 children and a soldier. Israel's Iron Dome system had a 90% success rate when intercepting rockets.

In the wake of the fighting, the Palestinian Authority is struggling to retain what remains of its backing, torn between the revolutionary mood on the streets and the need to maintain day-to-day coordination with Israel, which controls networks of settlements, roads and checkpoints throughout the West Bank. “If we do not provide something tangible for the people, we will be over,” said Ahmed Majdalani, a close aide to the Palestinian Authority's 85-year-old president, Mahmoud Abbas.

The Gaza clash was sparked by two parallel crises in east Jerusalem, which Israel conquered from Jordan in 1967.

One is the pending eviction of several Palestinian families like Ms. Kurd's who live in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. Refugees from cities within Israel proper, they were settled by Jordanian authorities shortly after Israel's creation, on land that had been Jewish-owned before 1948. Israeli law, which doesn't allow Palestinians who left Israel in 1948 to reclaim lost properties, permits previous owners to retake land that had been seized by the Jordanian government, as long as no new title exists.

The second crisis arose after Israeli police dispersed worshipers in the Al Aqsa Mosque during the holy month of Ramadan, responding to incidents involving stone-throwing and fireworks—and causing outrage across the Muslim world.

Ms. Kurd and her twin brother, Mohammed, grandchildren of Palestinians who fled Haifa in 1948, have become household names among Palestinians and in the wider Arab world as they have posted videos confronting Jewish settlers and Israeli police moving into their street.

Hamas, which seized the Gaza Strip from Mr. Abbas in 2007, demanded that Israeli forces withdraw from Sheikh Jarrah and the al-Aqsa compound by 6 p.m. of May 10, fusing Gaza's complaints with those of Palestinians within Israel and the West Bank. When Israel ignored the deadline, Hamas unleashed the first of its rocket barrages.

Israel's military assesses that Hamas sees a historic opportunity in the current moment, positioning itself as the defender of Jerusalem, tapping into the feelings of young activists and expanding its influence beyond Gaza to the West Bank and even to Arab communities within Israel. While violence within

Israel's Arab towns and neighborhoods has died down in recent days, the Islamist movement poses a particularly dangerous threat to the Palestinian Authority's future, Israeli officials say.

That is especially so after the Authority's Mr. Abbas, who hasn't faced voters since 2005, canceled long-delayed legislative and presidential elections that were slated for May and July. No Palestinian in the West Bank or Gaza younger than 33 has ever had a chance to vote.

"For me, the one who resists has legitimacy," Zaid Shuaibi, a 32-year-old activist with the Haq human-rights movement in the West Bank city of Ramallah, said about Hamas. "There are two ways of having legitimacy: Either you resist and pay the price with the blood of martyrs, or you have elections. If you have neither, you have zero legitimacy."

Palestinian frustrations have grown as Mr. Netanyahu has allowed the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, foreclosing options for a viable Palestinian state.

Israeli negotiations with Mr. Abbas toward the internationally accepted two-state solution have been on hold since 2014. Although the Palestinian economy has grown at a steady clip since the Oslo accords, the gap in living standards with Israel has barely narrowed. Per capita GDP in the West Bank and Gaza is less than one-tenth of Israel's, according to the World Bank.

"This is an uprising against the fact that in the 28 years since the Oslo agreement, the negotiations have led to nothing," said Mr. Barghouti, the leader of a rival Palestinian party.

Just a few weeks ago, it seemed as if Mr. Netanyahu had succeeded in sidelining the Palestinian issue. There had been few protests during the pandemic.

Defying the notion that Israel's isolation in the Arab world could end only once a Palestinian state was established, last year's Abraham Accords led to Israeli diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. The peace process with the Palestinians hardly figured in Israeli elections in March.

Jamileh Tawfiq, a 24-year-old in Gaza City, said she never expected to see the day when Palestinians joined together the way they are now. "This is the right time for unity, for all the Palestinians to agree on something, because otherwise we are going to lose Palestine forever," she said, as booms from an Israeli strike interrupted the interview. Ms. Tawfiq said she supports national unity but not a particular party.

At a rally for Gaza on Tuesday on the main square of the West Bank's political center, Ramallah, euphoria was palpable.

"If you talked to people just two weeks ago, there was a lot of despair. All of my friends were aiming to leave the country. Now they all want to stay," said one organizer, Ahmad al-Aqraa, a 30-year-old who normally studies architecture in Paris and who isn't an Islamist. "We don't know what will happen eventually...but at least, for the first time, now there is hope. Everybody has hope." He declined to offer solutions to the Palestinian problem, saying that would be for the new networks of campaigners.

Former Palestinian economy minister Bassim Khoury, who runs the Pharmacare pharmaceutical company in the West Bank, said he was more concerned than hopeful about the latest events. Mr. Khoury, 61, said he must acknowledge that

the Oslo agreements have failed to deliver, but he worries about where the Palestinian street's new demands will lead.

“As much as somebody may not want to believe in a two-state solution, I cannot see any other solution that may be possible,” he said. “The alternative is continued warfare, chaos and genocide. And I don't want genocide for us, or for the Jews for that matter.”

The two-state solution remains the official position of Mr. Abbas's Palestinian Authority. Though Hamas has never abandoned the idea of eliminating Israel, it changed its charter in 2017 to say it would accept a Palestinian state comprising the West Bank and Gaza, as at least a temporary step.

Mr. Abbas's Fatah movement, Hamas and a slew of independent candidates were supposed to compete this month in the first Palestinian legislative elections since 2006. In canceling the vote, Mr. Abbas blamed Israeli unwillingness to allow voting in east Jerusalem. Opinion polls suggested he would lose.

“What we have today [in the Palestinian Authority] is not a leadership but a bunch of realtors who oversee a people that are exploited like an oil well,” said Ashraf Abu Iram, 35, who was a candidate from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a secular group listed as terrorist by the U.S.

When young Palestinian activists speak of a one-state solution, the meaning is not always the same. On one end of the spectrum are those, backed by some on the Israeli left, who envision a binational state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea where everyone, Arab and Jew, has the same rights.

“We need to find counterparts on the Israeli side,” said Dimitri Diliiani, who is a member of Fatah but opposes Mr. Abbas's leadership. “One-state solution

means Gazans can live in Tel Aviv, and people from [the Israeli city of] Herzliya can live in Gaza if they wish. It's one person, one vote."

To many other Palestinians, the one-state solution means simply turning the tables. Mr. Shuaibi, the activist in Ramallah, said he expected many of Israel's 7 million Jews would leave.

"We're not saying we want to throw them in the sea. But if they want to live in this country, under the Palestinians—well, it's our country, and they took it from us."

Ms. Kurd, the 23-year-old in east Jerusalem, went further, saying she was sure that at the first sight of a proper Palestinian uprising, Israeli Jews would flee "to Europe or America or wherever they're from."

When reminded that the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews were born in the country and have nowhere else to go, Ms. Kurd, wearing skinny jeans and white sneakers, waved one hand dismissively while clutching her iPhone in the other: "This is their problem."

Asked whether she supports Hamas, she said: "Nobody represents me, but we all should welcome all forms of resistance."

Mr. Majdalani, President Abbas's aide, said he understood the frustrations of young Palestinians like Ms. Kurd, but said an uncompromising position stems from inexperience. In his day, he said, he and his friends never thought of anything except armed resistance. Then came the deaths, the setbacks and the realization that the only solution was a negotiated one.

That isn't the message some young activists want to hear. "There is a new dynamic, a new energy, and a new generation," said veteran Palestinian negotiator Hanan Ashrawi, 74. "I love them, and I fear for them."