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# Rethinking justice beyond human rights. Anti-colonialism and intersectionality in the politics of the Palestinian Youth Movement

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the politics of the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) – a contemporary social movement operating across a number of Arab and western countries. Unlike analysis on the Arab Uprisings which focused on the national dimension of youth activism, we explore how the PYM politics fosters and upholds an explicitly transnational anti-colonial and intersectional solidarity framework, which foregrounds a radical critique of conventional notions of self-determination based on state-framed human rights discourses and international law paradigms. The struggle becomes instead framed as an issue of justice, freedom and liberation from interlocking forms and hierarchies of oppression.

**KEYWORDS** Palestine; transnational social movements; intersectionality; human rights; anti-colonialism

## Introduction

This article discusses the politics and praxis of the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) ‘a transnational, independent, grassroots movement of young Palestinians in Palestine<sup>1</sup> and in exile worldwide as a result of the ongoing Zionist colonization and occupation of our homeland’ (Palestinian Youth Movement, n.d.). It extends the scope of the study of contemporary youth activism and social movements to a portion of the youth population which struggles from outside the boundaries of the nation-states, i.e., refugees and diaspora, albeit in high synergies with events taking place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In so doing, it redefines the object at the core of the waves of ‘contentious politics’ (Tilly, 2008, p. 5) known as the Arab Spring, which ceases to be opposition to a singular, national political regime and rather becomes a broader regional and global

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context marked by rising economic inequalities, authoritarianism, and violence (see, for example, Bray, 2017; Vatikiotis & Yörük, 2016).

The PYM is an example of activism that reflects and perhaps provokes radical developments across different areas of critical scholarship, including critical legal studies, with Palestine as a central frame. The movement's intellectual and political trajectory sits in the wake of the transnational Palestinian solidarity politics developed since the 1930s and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and which relied on the solidarity between antiracist and anti-colonial struggles across the globe (Allen, 2018; see also Tabar, 2017). Rather than calling for (more) representation within the existing, although exclusive and fragmented, political framework, PYM youth seek to prompt a radical shift towards past or existing forms of political mobilization and alliances. In this article, we explore how the PYM navigates a contemporary context contradictorily characterized by the enduring legacy of Western liberal coloniality and the intersectional sensibilities increasingly characterizing the landscape of contemporary social movements. We will focus in particular on how their praxis suggests ways to transcend the traditional tension between gender and national liberation through a justice-centred approach that recognizes the interlocking nature of the hierarchies of power affecting the movement from within and from without. In their praxis, we suggest, the quest for justice supersedes an individualistic, state-centred liberal approach to freedom and self-determination, as described by mainstream human rights discourses and international law paradigms, and requires building and sustaining the 'intersectionality of movements' (Davis, 2016, p. 27) in the struggle against the colonial and imperial 'matrix of domination' (Hill Collins, 2000). PYM thinking seeks to disentangle the imaginary of justice from the enduring constraints of colonialism (Erakat, 2019; Mutua, 2000) through the insights of radical critique, while potentially contributing to the development of critical theory through their situated and committed praxis.

The article is based on research we undertook between 2014 and 2019. Throughout this period we followed the PYM's activities on their online outlets, analysed the online materials produced by the PYN/PYM (see *infra*) and carried out in-depth interviews with the main co-founders of and the PYM members who were most active in their national chapters at the time of the research. Interviews were undertaken in 2016 within the scope of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme research grant 'POWER2YOUTH'.<sup>2</sup> We interviewed seven Palestinian women and five Palestinian men<sup>3</sup> who at the time of the interview were aged between twenty-six and thirty-five years. Some held UNRWA-assigned refugee status, and most were third or fourth generation Palestinians holding the citizenship of their birth and/or residence countries. Most were in postgraduate higher education or were seeking ways to further it, and represented themselves as sharing ground with other underprivileged

subjects across various neo-liberal landscapes of precarity. All names have been changed for anonymization purposes. In the different countries we purposefully travelled to (France, Jordan, Lebanon, the US) we also undertook participant observation during ongoing local activities.<sup>4</sup> We also build here on extensive informal discussions and conversations held with several PYN/PYM members across a number of years, as the organization was unfolding and going through its various stages.

The article is structured as follows. First, we contextualize the establishment of the PYM within the landscape of Palestinian youth political organizing. Subsequently, we discuss the Movement's intersectional approach within contexts marked by enduring Orientalist (Said, 1979) and colonial legacies, with a focus on the relationship between gender and national liberation. Next, we discuss how PYM's politics foregrounds a tension between international and human rights law, on the one hand, and their aspiration to justice and liberation on the other, and suggest further exploration of the ways in which these radical critiques flourish between theory and praxis (Bell, 2012) in the development of Palestinian political thought.

## The Palestinian Youth Movement: Politics in and from the diaspora

The establishment in 2007 of the (Palestinian Youth Network 2007a, 2007b), the predecessor of the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM), stands in continuity with the leading role which Palestinian youth historically played in the struggle for liberation (Khoury-Machool, 2007, p. 22), and in response to the political fragmentation precipitated by the Oslo Agreements. Palestinian youth and students were at the forefront of the first *intifada* which in 1987 shook Israel military control of the Palestinian territories it occupied in 1967. In the diaspora, the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) was established a few years earlier than the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO),<sup>5</sup> stretching to encompass over 'one hundred chapters and one hundred thousand members globally' (Joudah, 2012, p. 67). Akin to other exile-based Palestinian political formations, however, the GUPS was progressively emptied of its political weight in the midst of the new political realities engendered by the negotiations between the PLO and Israel. The Oslo Agreements shifted the main locus and focus of Palestinian politics to the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGs), which were placed under the rule of the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA). The PA:

not only sidelined the PLO, the refugees (as well as Palestinians in Israel), and their demands but also further fragmented the Palestinian community, leaving those not under their mandate in limbo as to who could represent and claim their rights. (Salih et al., 2018, p. 11)

By the mid-1990s, the political disenfranchisement of Palestinians in the diaspora was reflected in the 'collapse' of the GUPS (Joudah, 2012, p. 67; Abdulhaq, 2008), which left youth without a Palestinian-led political subject that would represent their subjectivities, voices, and interests. Their agency was subsequently largely subsumed under solidarity organizations, and the political ties with Palestinians living in the WBGs weakened under the tightening grip of the Israeli occupation and colonization and the divisions increasingly traversing the PA.

Against the background of this political fragmentation and disenfranchisement, the ethos of the PYN/PYM is that of young people wishing to participate in the liberation struggle to end the occupation of Palestine 'irrespective of our different political, cultural and social backgrounds' (Palestinian Youth Movement, n.d.) and to revive the democratic tradition within Palestinian politics, from the standpoint of exile. The by-laws of the PYN described an elaborate two-tier organizational structure composed of a national and an international level (Palestinian Youth Network, 2010a), which the PYM maintained. Its methodology included the organization of a number of international activities – such as international conferences, summer camps and summer schools and 'speaking tours' (Palestinian Youth Network, 2009, 2010b, 2010c) – for which they relied, in varying amounts and proportions, on contributions collected through fundraising, governmental and/or local authorities, and their own contributions.

Although central in the organization's self-presentation, the youth label appears to be more a political expedient than the reflection of a generational standpoint, as for example, posited by Linda Herrera with reference to the Egyptian context (Herrera, 2012, p. 340). More specifically, the upper limit (35 years old)<sup>6</sup> emerges as a means to carve out a political space shielded from the influence of older male leaders (Ahmad, 2013, p. 5), which especially after Oslo monopolized leadership positions in the Palestinian movement and society, and more broadly discouraged youth autonomous political action (Joudah, 2012, p. 42). Indeed, Asim, a PYM member, explained that

We needed this space for younger people who wanted to be active politically without having someone who is 60/70 years old, who played their role, who sacrificed a lot, who we still have tremendous respect for, who we have a lot to learn from ... but we need to be given that space and to organize on our own.

Asim's words pay tribute to seniors as carriers of valuable experiences but also relay youth eagerness to become politically active and to do so on their own terms. Being youth was also associated with being willing to take risks for change. Asim, for example, called for lowering the age of membership, in order to make more space for 'people who are angry with what's going on and people with a future they care about, and a future they'll invest in'.

The shift from PYN to PYM was decided in 2011,<sup>7</sup> reflecting youth desire to become more active at the everyday and grassroots levels in the spaces they inhabited. Sa'id, one of the founders of PYN/PYM, relayed that what they were seeking was 'to be organizers, on the ground, [to] organize communities and not to speak in their place'. As many of our interviewees told us, a key element of the appeal of the PYM for Palestinian youth in the diaspora was its refusal to be constrained to a 'solidarity position' with Palestinians living in the WBGs. 'You're Palestinian no matter where you are and we have a role to take up to end the occupation and support the liberation movement' said, for example, Dana.

Although, as Sa'id recounted, Palestinian youth living under the PA and/or in refugee camps (in the WBGs or in neighbouring Arab countries) took part in the process leading to the establishment of the PYN/PYM (see, for example, Abu Assi, 2011; Palestinian Youth Network., 2010a), the texturing of a transnational political relationship did not lead to the establishment of a PYM chapter in the WBGs, partly due to what Aisheh defined as 'the saturation of the political scene [...] everyone has allegiances either to a party or to a non-profit or NGO,<sup>8</sup> as well as other things that Palestinians are facing, in terms of depoliticization, and apathy and demoralization'.<sup>9</sup> These challenges are compounded by the current forms of Palestinian youth activism in the WBGs, which escapes formal, pyramidal structures of political mobilization (Høigilt et al., 2013, pp. 2–3), and by the PA's use of WBGs-based Palestinians' connection with Palestinians in the diaspora to 'delegitimize them and question the authenticity of their alleged grassroots approach' (Joudah, 2012, p. 43).<sup>10</sup> PYM's collaboration and coordination with WBGs-based Palestinian youth is therefore maintained by 'keeping connections with organisations that are already established over there and really trying to make sure these relationships are more robust', continued Aisheh.

Still, the desire of Palestinian youth to connect politically transnationally emerges clearly in the work of several scholars. At the level of cultural resistance, Maira (2008), for example, foregrounds the transnational connections between Palestinian and Arab youth rappers from the US to France, to the Arab region. Focusing on the political views and aspirations of WBGs-based Palestinian youth, Joudah (2012) suggests that although they stated that political or national bonds with Palestinian youth activists in the diaspora were 'relatively non-existent' (Joudah, 2012, p. 49), they were also adamant that they had a 'role to play in Palestine's future' and that reciprocal communication and exposure was on the rise (Joudah, 2012, p. 49; see also Høigilt, 2013, p. 355 on the 'Independent Youth Movement').

### Anti-coloniality, intersectionality, and liberation

'Gender has been central to Palestinian liberation and their conception of decolonization across time and space' (Tabar & Desai, 2017, p. xi).

Nevertheless, as many scholars have cogently argued, women's rights and gender equality agendas have been key pillars in the architecture of Western colonial projects (see, for example, Abu-Lughod, 1998; Yeğenoğlu, 1998), and remain a crucial terrain of othering in the former metropolis' soil (see, for example, Fassin, 2010; Rostock & Berghahn, 2008). Nada Elia (2017) has compellingly presented critiques of global north feminism in its structuring by dominant (including colonial and Zionist) narratives and consequent inability to engage with the question of Palestine beyond a micro-level analysis, finding 'indications that Global North feminism is still ill-equipped to deal with a women's agenda that denounces colonialism rather than whatever version of home-grown patriarchy happens to impact us' (Elia, 2017, p. 49). PYM's approach towards the relationship between gender and national liberation is thus forged in the midst of this complex and thorny scenario characterized by the enduring legacy of Western liberal coloniality and the intersectional sensibilities increasingly characterizing the landscape of contemporary social movements the globe across. Hence, Ahmad, for example, remarked that the woman question is 'the first argument for the Western countries to enter the Third World' and accordingly, he reported discussing 'these issues only between us'.

PYM women and men resolve and overcome this tension, we suggest, by insisting on the intersectionality of their approach, consistent with similarly forged sensibilities increasingly characterizing the landscape of contemporary social movements across many parts of the world. To begin with, despite the gender neutrality of the subject of its official communication, i.e., 'youth' (see, for example, Palestinian Youth Network, 2008; Palestinian Youth Movement A; Palestinian Youth Movement, 2012b), gender equality is central in the PYM's pursuit of national liberation (Palestinian Youth Network, 2011, p. 3; Palestinian Youth Movement, 2012a). Contrary to what emerges in existing (albeit scant) literature discussing gender hierarchies in youth activism (see, for example, Coe et al., 2013; Gordon, 2008), and scholarship on gender and Palestinian nationalism and/or activism (see, for example, Younes, 2010; Amireh, 2003; Høigilt et al., 2013, p. 4; Fincham, 2012, pp. 127–8), gender does not appear to constitute an organizing principle affecting a PYM member's role and/or mobility within the movement. Women participated in its establishment, and continue to be engaged in PYM on equal terms with their male peers, sharing roles and leadership positions,<sup>11</sup> and contributing to intellectual and political debates (see, for example, Abu Samra, 2013; Palestinian Youth Movement, 2013; L. Qutami, 2014a, 2014b).<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, a reluctance to prioritize gender over other axes of inequality and oppression emerges, for example, in the words of Noor who in response to our question as to whether PYM had ever organized activities on International Women's Day, underlined the now mostly erased class-

connotation of this commemoration: 'We have been involved in International Working Women's Day', she said.<sup>13</sup>

Building a justice-oriented organization necessarily involves, as Sa'id insisted, working 'on our relationships to one another in terms of social, gender, culture, geographical origin'. This statement encompasses both a position on the quality of the movement's internal dynamics, as discussed above, and a political framework enabling the establishment and nourishing of justice-oriented alliances with other people and communities in struggle. According to Asim:

If I want to introduce PYM to someone, I say it's a transnational grassroots youth organization that takes a justice-centred approach towards achieving complete liberation of Palestine. 'Justice-centred' means being in solidarity or recognizing that our struggle is not the only struggle and there are other justice struggles that need to be supported and have to be supported if we want to achieve liberation. So, it has to do with cross-movement building, recognizing that the injustice perpetrated against the Palestinians was not only a nationalist oppression, there are many different levels of oppression, look at race, class and gender, so I think this is what justice means.

Aisheh similarly stressed the group's intersectional approach: 'the joint struggle is really important for the US chapter' in the particularly diverse community of the Bay Area activities. As we discuss more in-depth elsewhere (Salih et al., [Forthcoming](#)), PYM activists' anticolonial ethos enables the texturing of intersectional alliances with social movements struggling across multiple locales against the enduring 'coloniality of power' (Quijano, 2000). The Arab Uprisings 'acted as a galvanising force [which] provided some Palestinians in the diaspora with new ways of connecting politically to the Arab world, and of connecting events in the Arab world to the Palestinian cause' (Gabiam & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017, p. 743; see also Salih et al., 2017). 'This colonial continuum in the power structures in which we were moving in Tunisia, in France, in Palestine, became clearer for us', said, for example, Ali, 'there are very common issues and common challenges and common struggles, where we stand'. The French chapter of the PYM was, for example, very much invested in the organization of the 'Arab Youth Conference for Liberation and Dignity' (Palestinian Youth Movement, 2012c), which issued a declaration centring the struggle for Palestine in the broader struggle against neo-colonial forms of domination (Palestinian Youth Movement, 2012a), while the PYM-USA has been sharing with the struggle of Black and Indigenous people across Ferguson (Palestinian Youth Movement – U.S.A, 2014) and Standing Rock (Palestinian Youth Movement – U.S.A, 2016), and joined hands with *Colectivo Zapatista* (Quintanilla & Moghannam, 2015), and the Kumeyaay and Yaqui Nations (Palestinian Youth Movement – U.S.A, 2018) in protesting against the presence of the US-Mexican border. Meanwhile, sharing a collective narrative around 'indignity and dispossession due to colonial



power' and 'intersectional narratives and analysis' constitute major catalysts for the involvement of non-Palestinian college students in pro-Palestinian initiatives in college campuses in the US in organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), Group Movimiento Estudiantil ChicanX de Aztlán (MEChA), and Black Student Alliance (Hill et al., 2018, p. 249).

The PYM's trajectory in these directions coheres with increasing attention to and cogency of critiques of (very much state-based) international law and human rights discourses, particularly as products of colonial frames and imperial power, and as inherently incapable of envisaging, let alone delivering, the more generous and revolutionary imaginaries of justice and liberation.

### Justice and liberation: Law and human rights

The PYN/PYM started with a general acceptance of the international law and human rights framing of Palestinian politics – or the 'Palestine issue' – endorsed (although not upheld in any meaningful way) by the EU and its member states, and with international resonance particularly at the UN. Relatively rapidly, however, and impacted by political developments both in the MENA region and in their own diasporic contexts, individuals and the Movement itself found this framing to be un-sustaining of their own aspirations, experiences, identities, and sense of justice. According to Sa'id:

In Paris [PYN Conference, 2007], one of our principles was that our approach would be a human rights approach<sup>14</sup>; in Palestine, this is seen as an alternative approach to Oslo, so it's no longer on the political negotiations approach but for human rights, international law, going back to law. But quickly we decided that it was not our approach, there were two critiques. To ask to be given our rights, this wasn't our project, our project was to liberate our land, for justice; to see whether we can have this or that right is not what we're doing in this project. The other critique is about what it gives us; this body of law doesn't always play out in our favour. So to base our project on international law, to construct it on the basis of that law, is to construct it on something that may oblige us to accept things that are against our project and unfavourable. So it's justice rather than law, liberation rather than law.

The process of developing the approach to international law and human rights was conscious and studied. According to Aisheh, between 2008 and 2011 (when the Network became the Movement) and building particularly around the summer schools they organized for members, they 'developed the politics of a core group of people' from different parts of the Network/Movement and produced 'a series of position papers' on a range of issues that were clearly felt to be of fundamental concern and that included 'the human rights issue':

[W]e were very intentional about establishing our framework as an anti-colonial liberation framework, not a human rights framework. We will utilize human rights when it is strategic to do so, it will come into things, but [...] it's never the primary focal point of things, like 'we're against what Israel's doing because it's against international law'. Yes, it is against international law, and they are war criminals [...] and they have a terrible track record, but that's not how we frame things. We frame things as: Israel is a settler colonial project and the way we are going to liberate ourselves is through fighting an anti-colonial struggle for liberation.

A critique of the 'human rights/international law framework' is placed in apposition to 'liberation struggle' for the purposes of the PYM framework by Zayneh Hindi in the PYM's 2013 Nakba publication (Hindi, 2013). Drawing on the internal position paper on 'The Rights-Based Approach', she argues (Hindi, 2013, p. 25) that the human rights framework is 'problematic' for anti-colonial struggle *inter alia* because the 'reference points and authority' of a 'juridical, rights-based discourse' are placed with and referred to 'bodies, institutions, conventions, rulings and resolutions that are rooted in hegemonic, juridical structures rather than indigenous, justice- and liberation-centered ones'. Palestinians are thereby placed in the position of passive victims 'waiting for their rights to be given to them or implemented by external bodies' while they should instead be 'decision-makers and agents of action'. Scholarship on law and colonialism has indicted international law and its institutions on similar grounds (Berman, 1998–99; Weeramantry, 1998–99; Anghie, 2006).

Other themes invoked by the observations by Sa'id and Aisheh quoted above, as well as Hindi's written summary of the PYM's internal position paper on this subject recurred in discussions with interviewed PYM members in particular regard to human rights and international law. They include the idea and presentation of 'human rights' as non-political, which is linked to the approaches of solidarity organizations, particularly in Europe. Paying tribute to the Palestine Solidarity collective, Ali stated:

We've been working inside this framework for a very long time but then when it appeared for us that our vision and discourse was not compatible with the human rights, Oslo, international law agenda of these organizations, we began to organize more independently.

Here, rather than 'human rights/international law' being perceived as a strategic approach alternative to the political approach of Oslo, the notions are conflated as all being part of an unsatisfactory approach. For her part, Noor insists that the human rights discourse has strategic value in reaching out to solidarity groups: 'We use it, but we don't necessarily make it our only discourse'. The reliance placed by solidarity organizations on the human rights/international law framework as the dominant approach to the political framing of Palestine reflects the way in which these concepts have come to

be privileged in public discourse and all sorts of activism in recent decades. Thus, Marks is able to refer to the 'Age of Human Rights' in presenting the 'romantic account of human rights, the story of the establishment and consolidation of the international human rights regime' before turning to the more critical approaches which have attracted scholarship in recent years (Marks, 2012, 314, p. 309). In Palestine, where the particular context produces distinct pressures, the political leadership is invested in the international law discourse and framework, and human rights framing has been vigorously promoted by international actors and donors, especially post-Oslo (Allen, 2013; Carapico, 2014). The BDS initiative, considered by many to be a major manifestation of and site for resistance coming out of Palestine in the last years, invokes international law in framing its appeals to allies (BDS Movement, n.d.). Elia (2017, p. 46) observes from a view of US solidarity mobilizing that 'arguably the most significant success of the BDS campaign so far has been the open discussion of Israeli violations of international law and of the human rights of the Palestinian people'.

While PYM supports this deployment of the discourse in its activism<sup>15</sup> – possibly also in recognition of the BDS movement's transnational anticolonial and antiracist appeal (see, for example, Abdulhadi et al., 2012; Allen, 2018; Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009; Tabar, 2017) – the discomfort or dissatisfaction with the limits of law and human rights voiced by PYM members starts from their presentation and promotion as 'non-political' (a position defended by international and local human right groups in Palestine, for divergent reasons). Critical legal scholars – and critics in other disciplines – have strongly contested the claims to 'neutrality' (as well as 'universality') of human rights and international law and those actors invested in promoting it as a universal good, insisting instead on their irredeemably close entanglement with (colonial and imperial) power (Berman, 1998–99; Kennedy, 2002, 2012; Hopgood, 2013; and see; Chimni, 2012 on the rule of law). While these critiques are intended as global, there are also Palestine-specific contributions: Mouin Rabbani, himself a former researcher with al-Haq (the first Palestinian human rights organization, located in the West Bank), published an excoriating review of Human Rights Watch's partiality as demonstrated by the positions taken and interventions made by the organization during Israel's assault on Gaza 2008–09, ostensibly all based on and invoking international law and 'fact finding' (Rabbani, 2014).<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, in Palestine critics argue that in line with the dominant discourse, the human rights frame has been promoted to intentionally depoliticize struggle. According to Allen (2013), after Oslo, 'human rights organizations became a refuge for former activists who, in the critics' accounts [...] were not to remain nationalists and resistance fighters'. In 2013, writing in a PYM publication, Loubna Qutami named NGOs, 'International Solidarity bodies and discourses, and the international courts and state players' as

among new structures that, post-Oslo, 'have aimed to fill the void of the liberation project and its leadership' (Qutami, 2013, p. 6). For PYM member Asim, what made the PYM attractive in his eyes was that it was not a depoliticized solidarity or even humanitarian sort of initiative but a political initiative'. For PYM interviewees, the non-political or even depoliticizing presentation of the human rights/international law frame was a source of disconnect. According to Farah:

I think that the movement [PYM] contributed somehow [to] having a very specific, critical approach to the human rights discourse, and refusing to present it like a struggle for human rights: no, it's not just that, it's a struggle for justice, which is slightly different ...

Justice is a key concept for PYM members: 'dignity, justice and liberation', as voiced by Sa'id and invoked in the online literature.<sup>17</sup> In October 2015 the PYM website posted an International Call to Support the Intifada, insisting *inter alia* that '[t]his struggle is the uprising of a new generation of Palestinians, united everywhere around principles of dignity, justice and the liberation of all Palestine' (Palestinian Youth Movement, 2015). The movement aspires to a future 'characterized by freedom and justice on a social and political level' (Palestinian Youth Movement, 2015).<sup>18</sup> Human rights and international law were not invoked. According to Ali, 'What moved us was the issue of justice, the liberation of Palestine from the colonial project that is wider than the specific Zionist project'; while Sa'id insisted:

Our common notion is: we are against the colonial project, not for this or that Palestinian state. We are guided by a notion of justice, not simply in terms of international law, as we think in terms of inclusion.

For critics, there is plenty of evidence that law does not (cannot) deliver justice for/in Palestine without the 'political program [...] necessary to avoid confusing the equivocating tendencies of a human rights framework with a practice of decolonization' (Erakat, 2019, p. 233). For their part, PYM members insist that the PYM's platform is fundamentally inclusive: that the idea of 'justice' is first and foremost applied to the Movement and their individual relations with each other. To be against the colonial project is the convergence; there is no attempt to create a consensus on or even articulate a common vision of the 'what comes after' return and liberation. This articulation rejects Oslo and any presentation of Oslo as binding (politically, morally or 'legally': for early legal critiques of Oslo from Palestinian jurists see, for example, Shehadeh, 1996).

These anti-colonial positions have clear resonance with critical scholarship in drawing links between different struggles against oppression. In 2000, Makau Mutua opened his address to the annual meeting of the American Society of International Law by describing the 'regime of international law' as

'illegitimate' and 'a predatory system that legitimizes, reproduces and sustains the plunder and subordination of the Third World by the West. Neither universality nor its promise of global order and stability make international law a just, equitable and legitimate code of governance for the Third World' (Mutua, 2000, p. 31). Mutua was introducing 'this broad dialectic of opposition to international law' as the thrust of TWAIL (Third World Approaches to International Law), its commitment that '[a]ll factors that create, foster, legitimize, and maintain harmful hierarchies and oppressions must be revisited and changed' (Mutua, 2000, 38). He and others note shared principles with other critical scholars (Critical Race Theory, Critical Legal Studies, and Lat-Crit theorists: Mutua, 2000; Anghie, 2000, 2006; Chimni, 2006; Falk, 2016; see also Natarajan, 2012; Okafor, 2005; Fidler, 2003; Eslava, 2019). Such critique has clear resonance with PYM discourse. Having situated the PYM as part of an anti-colonial struggle for liberation, Aisheh continued:

For us it's not about 'well they're violating human rights' – because we don't give the agency to international bodies that have historically oppressed us. Why would we give legitimacy to the UN? Why would we give legitimacy to something that is primarily European-driven, that goes against our values and our principles as Palestinians, as People of Colour, as Third World organizers? And so it's important to us not to heed or give too much respect to international law, to humanitarian, human rights law, because of all of those have roots in Euro-centric institutions. So we really draw our power from indigenous struggles, from anti-colonial struggles, and that is the key to how we look at things.

Writing from the American University in Cairo, Natarajan (2012, p. 177) makes a broader point about 'the heavily negative perception of international law in the Arab world'. Following the so-called 'Arab Spring', she says, 'youth in the Arab world have a sense of being part of their own independence struggle, recalling the independence movements of postcolonial states'. Reflecting on the way the political discourse had changed, in his case particularly as a result of the Arab revolutions, Asim drew attention to the global framing as follows:

Before, I used to see Palestine as being central to the problems that our region's facing, or as *the* central part, rather than (as I do now) as a small part of the global system, which if you accept it then it's easy to accept the situation in Palestine, Israeli colonialism, a system that accepts so much inequality both within nations and on the international level, it's easy to accept a system of apartheid and settler colonialism . . . . This is what changed for me.

The conclusion here is about the dialogic relationship between the small part and the 'global system', framed as they both are by the current articulations and boundaries of international law, together with their inequalities and injustices. This appears to underlie the varying attitudes of PYM members interviewed for this study towards the issues of human rights and international law: from highly critical to equivocal to strategic, but not binding upon

the political framing of their own struggle, nor necessarily inherent to their own visions of liberation and imaginings of justice.

## Conclusions

In this article, we showed how the PYM's transnational anti-colonial and intersectional politics provides a further angle from which to discuss youth activism and social movements in, across and beyond the MENA region. Against the background of the increasing fragmentation of Palestinian politics and the disenfranchisement of Palestinian refugees living scattered across multiple locales, the Movement revives the Palestinian transnational solidarity politics developed since the 1930s and throughout the 60s and 70s which both enabled and prompted the texturing of shared meaning frameworks and political alliances with antiracist and anticolonial struggles across the globe (see among others Allen, 2018; Davis, 2016; Lubin, 2014). Their refusal to be confined to a white Western liberal pro-Palestinian solidarity position is compounded by a drive to connect and collaborate with Palestinian youth transnationally and on their own terms. Hence, the 'youth' label which qualifies their political formation appears to be less a marker of a specific generational standpoint and more an expedient allowing the PYM to articulate its politics autonomously, breaking with the constraining and discouraging influence of the older generation of Palestinian leaders crystallized in the aftermath of the Oslo agreements.

Intersectionality and justice are intimately entangled in PYM's political praxis. The movement operates in complex and stratified contexts enduringly albeit differently shaped by Western liberal colonial projects and oriental gazes, which are nevertheless witnessing the consolidation of a social movement landscape increasingly characterized by intersectional sensibilities and alliances. PYM's approach to the well-documented tension between gender and national liberation is therefore resolved, we suggest, by insisting on the interlocking forms and hierarchies of oppression based on gender, race, and class. This intersectional politics informs both the ways in which members relate to one another – as, for example, discussed with reference to the absence of gendered roles and hierarchies within the organization – and the political framework in which they operate which, as we discuss more in-depth elsewhere, encompasses alliances with Arab, Black and Indigenous movements (Salih et al., [Forthcoming](#)).

This radical critique informs their approach towards human rights and the law, in line with current and developing radical critiques of these disciplines and discourses. PYN/PYM activists depart from framing their aspirations for liberation and justice within the bounds of international law and human rights, to which they maintain a critical albeit at times also strategic approach. The position of scholar-activists of many of the PYM members we interviewed suggests that their

theory consciously informs their praxis, and they have developed their theoretical thinking in response to reflection on their praxis. The movement's explicitly anticolonial and intersectional praxis invites further reflection on the meaning and value of contemporary social movements' re-articulation of the relationship between law and justice for transcending the constraining national frame to which international (and human rights) law remains anchored.

## Notes

1. In PYM's political vision, the lands constituting Palestine correspond to the territory which was under the British Mandate until the UN Partition Plan ruled the establishment of the state of Israel (United Nations General Assembly, 1947). Unless otherwise specified, this is the meaning implied with our use of the term 'Palestine' throughout this paper.
2. Please refer to the methodology described in the introduction of the special issue: Sika, N. 'Beyond the Impasse: Youth Agency in Times of Crisis'.
3. In this article, we report extracts of interviews with the following PYM members, in order of citation: Asim – 12 May; Sa'id – 22 January; Dana – 25 June; Aisheh – 24 June; Ahmad – 22 January; Zayd – 23 January; Noor – 23 June; Salwa – 23 January; Ali – 24 January; Farah – 8 May.
4. E.g., 'Les défis de la résistance en Palestine, les défis de la solidarité en France', Conference organized by PYM-France on 22 January 2016.
5. The GUPS was established in 1959 and the PLO in 1964.
6. The PYN by-laws restricted membership to 'any person between the ages of 18 and 35 who is of Palestinian origin' (Section 5, 'Membership' Palestinian Youth Network, 2010a, p. 9).
7. The transformation was decided in the PYN's second International General Assembly (IGA) in Istanbul (Ayyash, 2013, p. 283). Although the timing would seem to indicate that it occurred in the wake of the Arab Spring, several interviewees reported that the decision had already been on the agenda for some time.
8. Factionalism dominates contemporary Palestinian politics (see, e.g., Barghouti, 2017; Høigilt et al., 2013, p. 5), 'nearly everyone is or is regarded to be affiliated with a faction' (Høigilt, 2013, p. 353) and since the institutionalization of the Fatah/Hamas division, working outside of party politics is increasingly difficult (Shaban, 2016, p. 49). Ahmad further reports that 'the percentage of Palestinian youth who affiliate themselves with political parties is the same percentage of youth who affiliate themselves with NGOs in the country which stands at (27 per cent)' (Ahmad, 2013, p. 2). On the NGOization of social movements in the WBGS see amongst others Hammami (1995), Jad (2008) and Allen (2013).
9. Several reports and polls have suggested that most young Palestinians are disillusioned with and have exited from politics (see among others Sharek Youth Forum., 2013, p. 10; Høigilt et al., 2013, p. 4; Christophersen et al., 2012, p. 12) although there remain 'pockets of political activism connected to popular resistance'. (Christophersen et al., 2012, p. 18).
10. Joudah relays that the simple association with activists and youth who studied abroad or planned to has WBGS-based Palestinian youth 'constantly accused by PA security and intelligence forces of being "American" and "Western"' (Joudah, 2012, p. 43).

11. For example, Salwa said, 'I never felt I'm less considered because I'm a woman, or excluded, or [that] my opinion is less valued or taken into consideration because of gender', and the PYM-Bay Area chapter has been consistently and uniquely women-led and driven.
12. This is consistent with the evidence of changing patterns of gendered forms of participation and leadership which some scholars observed in recent waves of youth mobilizations (Kandiyoti, 2014), alongside men's involvement in traditionally women-only domain of mobilization (see for example, Skalli, 2014, pp. 246; 249–50 with reference to anti-sexual harassment initiatives in Egypt and Morocco).
13. This qualification is consistent with what observed by some scholars discussing women's involvement in social and political struggles in the MENA region, partly reflecting the intention to take distance from the state feminism which operated under the authoritarian regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt (see for example, Khalil, 2014, p. 134; Skalli, 2014, p. 249).
14. The By-Laws of the PYN refer to 'using a rights-based approach to political advocacy' (see Section IV Methodology, n.H, Palestinian Youth Network, 2010a, p. 9).
15. See, for example, the homepage of PYM – U.S.A. chapter: <https://www.pymusa.com/> (accessed 23 October 2019).
16. The article was originally published in 2009; it was republished in 2014 against the background of Israel's next major assault on Gaza.
17. During the 'Arab Spring', despite experiencing social, economic, and political problems akin to those which sparked protests across much of the MENA region in 2010–2011, the demands of Palestinians in the WBGs at the time primarily addressed the split between Hamas and the PA, effectively taking 'the shape of a call for unity rather than the fall of the regimes' (Christophersen et al., 2012, p. 3).
18. Call of 25 October 2015. [http://www.pal-youth.org/%d9%86%d8%af%d8%a7%d8%a1-%d8%af%d9%88%d9%84%d9%8a-%d9%84%d9%84%d8%b4%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%81%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b7%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a-palestinian-youth-international-call/\(last](http://www.pal-youth.org/%d9%86%d8%af%d8%a7%d8%a1-%d8%af%d9%88%d9%84%d9%8a-%d9%84%d9%84%d8%b4%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%81%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b7%d9%8a%d9%86%d9%8a-palestinian-youth-international-call/(last) accessed 21 March 2016). The website was reworked in 2016 and this page is no longer accessible.

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