



# POWER2YOUTH

## Organizational Factors of Youth Exclusion and Inclusion in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

**Birzeit University**



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### Abstract

*The paper deals with youth collective agency in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). After describing the structural context constraining young women's and men's mobilization in the OPT, the paper moves on to investigate how youth organizations and movements contextualize "youth exclusion" and to assess if youth organizations are able to influence the mainstream political discourse and policies of the government institutions.*

**Keywords:** Palestine | West Bank | Youth | NGOs

### INTRODUCTION

This qualitative study aims at listening to and representing the voices of young Palestinians who are involved in various types of youth organizations. In some occasions, the young voices were complemented with interviews to older members of these organizations.

The process of data collection, analysis and writing of this report took place mostly in 2014 up until October of that year, and that writing was finalized as young Palestinians were taking the lead in a new expression of popular resistance, called (as of the time of writing) not an intifada ("uprising"), but a *habbeh* ("flare up") against the Israeli occupation.

It was generally difficult to arrange interviews with young people belonging to political parties. Given the fact that political activity may well expose a person to the risk of political detention by Israel and sometimes also by the Palestinian Authority, we found people apprehensive of taking part in interviews. The fact that some of the interviews were scheduled for October 2015, when widespread clashes against Israel were taking place, did not help. This in itself is a finding and shows that political participation (even as a participant in an interview or focus group discussion) is constrained by structural factors of, on the one hand, the protracted military Israeli occupation and, on the other hand, the oppressive regime of the Palestinian Authority.

### 1. METHODOLOGY

Following a literature review and mapping exercise of all organizations that work with youth either directly or indirectly, we conducted "ethnographic observation exercises" (attending and observing events related to youth activity and/or youth organizations), individual interviews and focus group discussions with a variety of organizations that are working with youth or youth-led:

- organizations with government relations and youth branches of political parties (3 interviews, 2 ethnographic events, and one focus group discussion with 7 participants: 6

- males and one female);
- NGOs (4 interviews, 3 ethnographic events, and one focus group discussion);
- unconventional organizations (3 interviews and one focus group discussion with 16 participants: 10 females and 6 males);
- business organizations (2 interviews).

In choosing the sample we aimed at diversity among all the organizations that work with youth. A team of two interviewers attended the ethnographic events, and conducted the interviews and the focus group discussions. Notes were taken and sometimes audiotaping was used as an additional record when informants had no objection and were seen to be comfortable with the suggestion.

We adapted the question guidelines, regularly following continuous data analysis in addition to the question guidelines set by the larger project. We coded the data using Atlas-ti software and analysed it following the P2Y Work Package 3 guidelines (Sika and Albrecht 2014), but also paying attention to the emerging themes based on the data itself.

The interviews, focus group discussions and the observational parts of the research were restricted to the West Bank as accessing the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem was not possible, and thus the findings apply to the West Bank only.

## **2. STRUCTURAL CONTEXT IN WHICH YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS ACT**

### **Policies affecting young people**

Palestine is not a sovereign state, even though following the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a Palestinian Authority (PA) was established in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The structural context of Palestinian society remains dominated by the ongoing Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip, the colonial settler nature of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the Apartheid Wall separating the two above-mentioned parts of Palestine from the parts that became Israel in 1948, and the ongoing judaization of East Jerusalem. Not only young people, but all layers of society are affected by these aspects of Israeli domination, as well as by the fact that there is no free movement of goods and people among the now increasingly isolated parts of historical Palestine, and even within these parts.

The international community's policy of non-intervention and lack of influence on Israeli policy is an additional structural factor of importance. It was only after Oslo Accords that youth organizations started to increase in number and have formal structure. Before Oslo and under Israeli direct control, as is true for other forms of organization, youth organizations were forbidden to exist.<sup>1</sup>

Although at one point (2005) there seems to have been a youth policy planning document as the basis for the establishment of a national youth policy, this process was put on hold following the creation of the Higher Council of Youth and Sports (HCYS) in 2012. To be mentioned also

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 4.

the *Youth Cross-cutting Strategy 2011-2013*, which notes the vision for Palestine's youth as being "empowered and participative youth, who have diversified and equitable opportunities for a balanced growth within the framework of a democratic, pluralistic society" (PA 2011:6). In none of the interviews did anybody allude to either the 2005 or the 2011 youth policy documents. People generally spoke about a lack of interest in youth by the Palestinian Authority.

### **The complexity of the legal structures**

Given the above-explained structural factors, most of this report relates to the area of the West Bank, which is the part of Palestine accessible to the Birzeit University research team. Adding to the complexity of the West Bank structural context is that it is divided into areas A, B and C, according to the Oslo Accords, with each area being more or less controlled by the Palestinian Authority and Israel respectively.

The Basic Law of 2003<sup>2</sup> applies like a national constitution to the areas governed by the Palestinian Authority. However, in addition to the A, B and C area divisions, in practice the legal situation of Palestinians is also complicated by remnants of previous legal systems (Egyptian in the Gaza Strip; Jordanian in the West Bank) that remain applicable, as well as the Israeli law which is applied in East Jerusalem.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the Hamas-won 2006 elections, a number of Hamas members have been detained by Israel. The internal division in relation to national leadership ended with Hamas control over the Gaza Strip and a Fatah-led PA "governing" the West Bank. The Palestinian Legislative Council, a democratically elected body, has not met since 2007.

While the Palestinian Basic Law largely adheres to international human rights, women are still to a considerable degree dependent on the Islamic Sharia courts (Al-Botmeh 2012). This means that women are not entitled to inherit to the same proportion as men, and in Palestinian society they are often denied even the smaller inheritance that is their right according to Sharia law. Even though the person's legal age for both men and women is 18 years old, this law is often not enforced. Also so-called honour killings continue to take place, both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. For example in 2013 alone 28 women lost their lives.<sup>3</sup>

### **The employment situation for Palestinian young men and women**

In a context of non-sovereignty and no control over borders, it is hardly surprising that the Palestinian Authority is unable to develop a flourishing economy (Assaf 2014). The problem of (youth) unemployment is well recognized and the main PA policy attempt to deal with this problem involves drawing them into the Palestinian Security Services, a body that already by 2006 counted about 56,000, almost twice the original number of 30,000 envisaged in the framework of the Oslo Accords (Madhoun 2006), and is currently thought to be close to 65,000 (World Bank 2015:16). Having a huge security services apparatus drawn to a large

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<sup>2</sup> Palestinian Basic Law (2003 Amended Basic Law), 18 March 2003, <http://wp.me/PcaoE-a>.

<sup>3</sup> "Ashrawi Calls to Put an End to Light Punishment Sentences for Crimes of Women Honor Killing", in *Wafa*, 22 February 2014, <http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=uhsu8qa23218014435auh8q>. See also Musleh (2016:16), De Bel Air (2016:22-3).

extent from otherwise unemployed young men has of course implications of interest for the security position of the party at the head of the Palestinian Authority.

Although the Palestinian Basic Law (art. 25) states that work is the right of every citizen and prohibits discrimination between men and women, the gap in the labour force participation rate between males and females remains one of the highest in the world, with up 70 percent of males compared to just under 20 percent of females reported being employed in 2014 (PCBS 2015:60, Al-Botmeh 2015).

Funding conditions for NGOs over the past decades have generally led NGOs to adopt a gender focus in their strategic planning. It may be for this reason that in the interviews with representatives of NGOs we found that most of these organizations tend to make a specific effort to address both males and females in their planning and activities. In relation to the Palestinian Authority's civil service employment policies, interviewees from youth organizations spoke more of age-specific constraints for young people than gender-specific employment restrictions. The Palestinian Authority civil service sector (16 percent of all employed in West Bank; PCBS 2015:109) continues to maintain a retirement age policy of 65, which on the one hand means job security for those who are already employed, but on the other hand there is little roll-over from the older generation to the younger generation.<sup>4</sup> However, with an eye to the above-mentioned gap in male-female labour participation, an interviewee from a local NGO notes that the fact that there is no specific gender policy in labour "is in itself a policy." According to him, there is no interest in working towards the greater involvement of women within the labour market. This local NGO, as most other youth organizations, actively promotes youth, including female youth employment in its programmes. However, given the structural constraints related to the Palestinian Authority's ability to build a viable economy, the influence of NGOs on the Palestinian Authority's efforts to support greater female participation in the labour market may remain limited.

### **Societal/political factors favouring or constraining young women and young men's mobilization and youth participation in organizations**

The general lack of human security associated with the Israeli occupation, the limited functioning capacity of the Palestinian Authority and the division between Hamas and Fatah have led Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip to look inward for personal support from immediate family and outward for social protection by efforts to obtain citizenship in other countries. In the recent past, several attempts by young people and others to mobilize for political change have led to great loss of life, like for example in the first (1987) and second (2000) intifadas, as well as in limited armed efforts by Gaza groups that have led to several Israeli air attacks and ground invasions in the past decade. An interviewee from a university student council party said: "Once the occupation is over, then everything can be possible."

The Palestinian population is nevertheless highly politicized, and young and old tend to support one or another political party or movement. However, this usually does not entail official membership of that party or movement. Political parties are registered within the

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with a representative of local NGO 3.

framework of the PLO, which was “illegal” under the Israeli occupation until the Oslo Accords of 1993. The lack of final solution and the general political instability have meant that “public membership” in political organizations continues to remain a sensitive issue and the risk of political detention remains a fact of life for political activists. The Israeli authorities continue to detain Palestinians, many of them young men. By April 2016, there were 6,295 Palestinian political detainees held by Israel (B’tselem 2016). For example, within the *habbeh* (widespread spontaneous popular protests) of October 2015, by the 26th of that month Israel had detained 1,000, at least 147 of them children (Redden 2015). Political activity is also curtailed within Palestinian society, with Hamas activists risking detention in the Fatah-dominated West Bank and likewise Fatah supporters in the Hamas-dominated Gaza Strip.

The last time elections took place for the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC) (in 2006), candidates needed to have reached the age of 28 in order to stand for election.<sup>5</sup> Youth branches of political parties can be found in the university student council bodies, with the various student groupings usually closely following one or another political party. Until the Oslo Accords (1993) student council elections had been the main barometer of internal politics in Palestinian society, and as such were highly regarded within the society. Given the fact that Palestine has not seen democratic elections since the PLC elections in 2006, this is to some extent still the case. The student council elections of Birzeit University are widely followed as an indication of the power of the main political parties,<sup>6</sup> as we observed in visiting a remote village in the north of the West Bank on the day of the elections.

However, female students attending a workshop on political participation organized by a local youth organization (8) admitted that family considerations play a role in their decision to be politically active or not: “Imagine if I won the nomination for my party at the student elections, what would my family say? And will they allow me to take that position?”<sup>7</sup> But this too is linked to an important degree to the Israeli occupation, because part of the family’s concern is that their daughter might be detained and abused while in detention.

Social organizations in Palestine, especially those that are partly dependent on Western financial support, tend to encourage youth participation. The extent of youth reached by these projects is usually rather limited. At the same time there are more spontaneous youth initiatives, such as the Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) youth groups in the villages,<sup>8</sup> Qawarib, a youth-led charity,<sup>9</sup> Youth against Settlements,<sup>10</sup> Love in the Time of Apartheid which is also led by youth,<sup>11</sup> as well as other youth initiatives in resistance to the Israeli occupation.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 3.

<sup>6</sup> For the latest results see Birzeit University, *Wafaa’ Islamic Bloc Wins Majority in Birzeit University Student Council Elections*, 28 April 2016, <http://www.birzeit.edu/en/node/15632>.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth organization 8.

<sup>8</sup> See the Facebook page of CBR youth groups (in Arabic): <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/Swa3ed.Alt2heel>.

<sup>9</sup> See Qawarib’s Facebook page (in Arabic): <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/Qawarib>.

<sup>10</sup> See the Facebook page of Youth against Settlements: <https://www.facebook.com/media.yas>.

<sup>11</sup> See the website of Love in the Time of Apartheid, <http://www.loveinthetimeofapartheid.org/en>.

### Government attitudes towards youth agency

In relation to the political divide between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the respective authorities tend to be interested in advancing youth mobilization as long as it follows their own political line, while at the same time restraining mobilization that follows the opposition line. The Higher Council of Youth and Sports (HCYS, previously the Ministry of Youth and Sports), based in Ramallah (West Bank), although theoretically covering all parts of Palestine as well as the diaspora, admits that its activities in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas is in control, are now limited. On the other hand, the Palestinian Authority's security services curtail Hamas activity in the West Bank, including its youth activities. Both the HCYS informant and the university council interviewee alluded to budgetary problems as an additional constraining issue regarding youth development projects.

### The main discourse on youth

It was interesting to note the different perspectives of interviewees in relation to what they referred to as the general discourse on youth. Older interviewees referred to the difference between the young people active in the popular resistance of the 1980s and the first intifada, and the young people of today. In their view, today's young Palestinians no longer have the spirit of social and political action that was so strong in the 1980s. One of the older interviewees referred to the youth of today as victims of the occupation and victims of the Oslo Accords. Another mentioned the apparent lack of engagement of the young people of today in the national cause: "After Oslo there was fragmentation and now everybody has their own priorities - work, health, etc. It used to be the national cause that pushed people."<sup>12</sup>

The slightly younger interviewees, often those who occupied leadership or management positions in youth organizations, acknowledged this:

In the 80s the young people were involved in the liberation efforts, but now there is no longer one main goal any more. The parties are not interested in change and in youth participating in this; the organizations want youth participation, but the market wants something else.<sup>13</sup>

These interviewees in positions of leadership in NGO youth organizations complained that there is no collective spirit any more: "There is the / and it is much stronger in them than the we. I want; I want; I want; and then they compete with each other."<sup>14</sup> "All they want is ATM."<sup>15</sup> "Youth are busy on social media, but not agents for change."<sup>16</sup> In almost all interviews we heard that the current generation is referred to in rather derogatory fashion as the "Facebook," the "coffeeshop," the "sagging trousers" generation, or even the *fafiyat* (roughly translated this means something like "not real men").

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 4.

<sup>15</sup> An ATM card, like employees of the civil service and NGOs have, in order to be able to withdraw money from the ATM machine.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 3.



Young members of youth organizations themselves, however, had mixed opinions. While on the one hand they thought that society sees them as positive, as needed by the political parties to effect change: "We are the biggest group [...] without us nothing will change,"<sup>17</sup> as confirmed by the Birzeit University Student Council focus group,<sup>18</sup> on the other hand they said that society's positive perspective on youth is related to youth who are studying or employed, but those who are unemployed (roughly a quarter of young people) are looked upon with negative eyes. Interesting was also that young women in the villages complained about society's negative perspective on the group's social activities, in which young men and young women participate, which were sometimes seen as not conforming to the society's conservative customs.

An interviewee from the youth branch of one of the political parties, whom we interviewed while the popular *habbeh* was still going on (October 2015), observed that every time an uprising happens the activists tend to be younger than in the previous uprising. He explained that nowadays people in their 20s often have bank loans to pay off (a relatively new phenomenon in Palestinian society), which makes them more focused on their own personal situation than collective action. The very young Palestinians who carry out resistance acts against the Israeli occupation are often school children, and their acts are not guided by any organization. Even when the organizations try to take a ride on the wave and call for demonstrations at certain locations, the young people (again often school children) ignore these calls and demonstrate at places of their own choice. The interviewee said that Israel, the Palestinian Authority as well as other Palestinian groups have been equally surprised by the agency of these very young Palestinians.

### Some openings for change from below...

In the focus group discussion with a village youth group,<sup>19</sup> we learned that the village council had acknowledged their role in the village and had invited them to take part in discussions. They had also protested against the dismissal of a community health worker in the village and this had led to the hiring of a new employee of the village council. It is this kind of interest in local politics that is also the goal of the GIZ "Youth Create Change" programme.<sup>20</sup> In this programme, GIZ encourages municipalities to assign one of their employees to deal with youth issues, and GIZ offers a training programme for these "youth officers" and their youth groups. However, in order to consolidate a role for young people in the local municipalities, GIZ also works with the PA Ministry of Local Government and youth participation is not yet a condition, but an incentive to be upgraded to a higher status as municipality.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with a representative of unconventional youth NGO 1.

<sup>18</sup> Focus group with seven members of the Birzeit University Student Council.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a representative of unconventional youth NGO 1.

<sup>20</sup> See the website of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ): <https://www2.giz.de/urbanet/news/detail.asp?number=4161>.

### 3. THE CHALLENGES OF MAPPING YOUTH RELATED ORGANIZATIONS IN PALESTINE

#### NGOs

It is not possible to get a decisive list of all organizations that are either purely youth or civil organizations that work with youth. The main ministry that provides accreditation to organizations is the Ministry of the Interior, while the Higher Council of Youth and Sports provides accreditation to youth organizations and a lesser number of organizations get their accreditation from the Ministry of Culture. More than one ministry is usually involved in the accreditation of an organization, which makes it difficult to get a comprehensive list (Rabah 2009). Additionally, the Ministry of the Interior, which has the largest list, does not provide it even with a formal permission.<sup>21</sup> Another issue is that classification of organizations is not clearly established; there are organizations that define themselves as youth organizations and there are also NGOs that conduct some work with youth (see below). In fact in a 2007 mapping exercise of Palestinian NGOs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the most often stated main objective of NGOs was to “empower the youth through sport, culture and social activities” (Al-Malki et al. 2007:xiv). The economic and political domains are notably absent.

There have been several attempts to map non-governmental organizations in Palestine, including the organizations working with youth (Costantini et al. 2011, Al-Malki et al. 2007). In this report, however, we have focused on the two mapping exercises conducted by Sharek (Rahal 2006, Rabah 2009) which were focused exclusively on youth organizations, with the 2009 report being the more comprehensive.

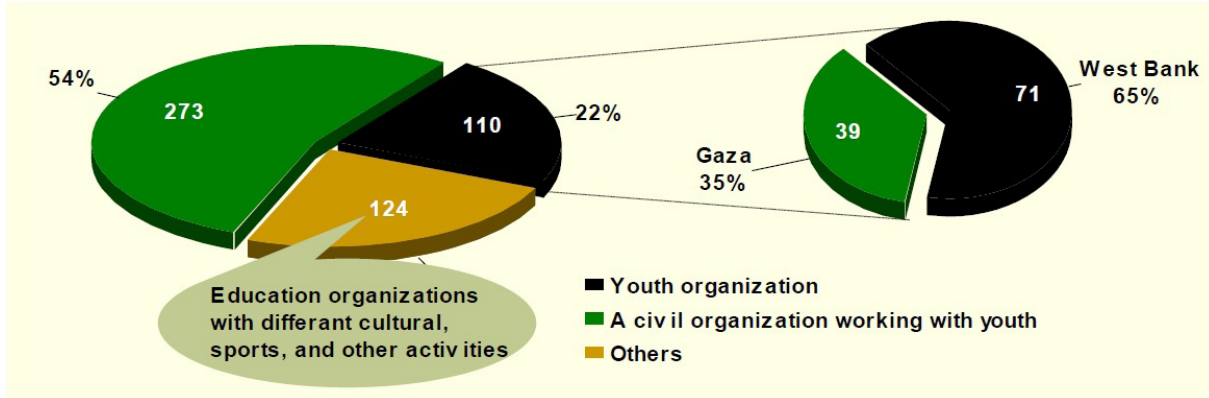
Rabah (2009) states that in a context of a steep increase in youth-related activity by local organizations often financially supported and driven by international donors' agenda (also noted by Al-Malki et al. 2007) and not necessarily according to the local need, the purpose of this mapping exercise was to evaluate what was being done for whom, where and by whom, and to identify gaps. Secondly, the report intended to assess expectations and needs of the organizations in order to better coordinate the donor effort. Thirdly, the exercise intended to set a basis on which to coordinate with Palestinian ministries and government bodies.

According to this mapping exercise, the majority of these organizations have an elected administrative body, but there is no clarification on whether the staff are youth or not, and thus classification into youth-led organizations (YLO) or youth-relevant organizations (YRO) is not applicable to the Palestinian context. Sharek Youth Forum classified a total of 507 organizations whose activities entailed working with youth. There were 273 (54 percent) civil organizations working with youth (their activities include, but are not exclusively focused on youth programmes/projects) and 110 (22 percent) youth organizations (focused on working with youth; 39 in the Gaza Strip and 71 in the West Bank, 35 percent and 65 percent respectively), and finally 124 (24 percent) organizations with different sports, social and cultural activities for the general population including youth (see figure 1).

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<sup>21</sup> Personal communication with employee of Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO).

**Figure 1 | Map of Organizations in the oPt**



Source: Rabah 2009:13.

In terms of geographical coverage, the mapped organizations indicated their coverage as follows: 22 percent reported that they work with youth in the city, village or refugee camp in which they are located, 35 percent cover the governorate in which they are located, 11 percent work with youth all over the West Bank, 17 percent work with youth all over the Gaza Strip, and 16 percent cover the national level (both West Bank and Gaza Strip) (Rabah 2009:15).

There are at least 20 youth organizations functional in Jerusalem. Although these organizations provide services to youth, they are not youth-led, and youth participation in administration and strategic planning is weak (Qous 2010).

The focus of the organizations is varied, with some concentrating on culture and education, others on women, and still others focusing on sports or social activities, health, or democracy and human rights. According to the Sharek report, organizations in the Gaza Strip are more directed towards cultural and educational activities while the West Bank organizations focus more on sports activities and youth development in general (Rabah 2009:18). In terms of organization type, youth organizations focus on youth development including enhancing leadership skills and promoting cultural tolerance in addition to educational activities as well as capacity building, while the civil organizations that work with youth concentrate on social and community-related activities that deal with youth in addition to their work on education and youth development.

In order to establish a licensed youth organization, the group must include at least 13 members aged 18 or older. Following an examination of the mission, vision, objectives, financial structure and security issues, they are or are not granted a license by the Higher Council for Youth and Sports. Bylaws of youth organizations stipulate that youth must participate in decision making. But in reality many of the youth organizations tend to be linked to a political party and a political agenda, which may limit the extent to which the youth in these organizations can really focus on their own needs as youth, and “in spite of the idealistic statements included in these bylaws, they are often just words that have no practical implications” (Brakel et al. 2009:22).

In fact, the civil organizations working with youth may tend to involve young people in decision-making perhaps more than the youth organizations do, since they are bound by the criteria set by the donor organizations for these specific projects.

Brakel et al. (2009:23-24) speak of two umbrella organizations: the Palestinian Youth Organizations Network (PYON) covers 30 youth organizations from all over the West Bank, and in the Gaza Strip a similar network (Siraj) operates to coordinate among 28-30 youth organizations.

### **Political parties and unconventional youth groups or movements**

It is notable that the literature on Palestinian youth-led or youth-relevant organizations does not include political parties and unconventional youth groups or movements. This is likely not a coincidence, as overt political activity exposes activists to potential ramifications from the Israeli military as well as Palestinian security services. This qualitative research attempted to fill the gap. However, the list of political parties, NGOs and unconventional youth groups or movements interviewed is kept by the researchers and will not be included in this report, in order to maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees. It would be unethical to provide names of organizations and interviewees, especially as this can place both organizations and individuals at risk of interrogation, detention or other punitive action.

## **4. PERCEPTIONS OF PALESTINIAN YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS AND MOVEMENTS ON THE EXCLUSION OF YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN**

The idea of a “public debate on youth” may be more relevant to an outsider’s view of what happened in some of the countries in the Arab world, than it is a debate actually taking place in these countries. Similarly, the idea of “youth exclusion” was not something that came up spontaneously in the interviews in Palestine. Even when we brought it up, the answers often indicated that “exclusion” does not necessarily relate specifically to the issue of youth, but for example to an entire population’s geographical exclusion, i.e., organizations in the West Bank cannot reach youth in East Jerusalem and/or the Gaza Strip.<sup>22</sup> There is also some inherent exclusion of certain groups of youth by the youth organization itself and the types of projects offered. Level of education may also be an excluding factor in young people’s ability to take part in organizations’ activities. For example, a participant from one organization complained that the young people’s English was so poor that he could not work with them.<sup>23</sup> A participant from another organization admitted that the NGOs working on programmes for young people tend to work with unemployed university graduates who are not particularly poor, since “the poor have other things to do, they have no time for our activities.”<sup>24</sup> In view of these statements, it is important to note the exclusion of certain layers of the Palestinian youth even in these internationally supported “youth development” initiatives.

The fact that Palestinian young people do not seem to see themselves as “excluded” by Palestinian society, however, does not mean that young people do not have grievances in

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<sup>22</sup> Interviews with representatives of the Higher Council of Youth and Sports (HCYS) and local youth NGOs 1 and 3.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 3.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a representative of international youth organization (GIZ).

their relations with the older generation, but these are more related to patriarchal and cultural restrictions on how young people are to behave. Such grievances are less related to a notion of being generally “excluded,” than to the restrictions related to cultural and social habits and norms.<sup>25</sup>

Historically, young people have played an important role in the resistance against the occupation and this continues to be recognized. In fact, at the time of writing young people were at the forefront of the struggle for liberation, likely feeling far from being excluded by their own society. When asked about young people’s exclusion, many of the youth organizations (local youth NGOs 1, 3, 7; HCYS) referred to the effect of the restrictions on access and mobility created by the Israeli occupation as well as the effect of the internal division between the PA and Hamas. They did not conceptualize “exclusion” as something inherent in Palestinian society. They spoke about being constrained to the West Bank and not being able to reach young people in Jerusalem. They also spoke about the fact that their activities in the Gaza Strip have been restricted since Hamas took over the leadership there.

In relation to the West Bank leadership, it was, however, also generally acknowledged that the older generation in political leadership have little interest in giving a role to the younger generation: “They are interested in their villas, their car and their VIP [status allowed by the Israeli authorities to cross the Allenby Bridge when travelling abroad].”<sup>26</sup>

Young people’s participation is to a large extent based on different types of “volunteering.” In the interviews with the local youth NGOs, a theme that tended to come up repeatedly was the idea of volunteering as an opportunity for young people in order to be socially involved and/or to advance their own career opportunities.<sup>27</sup> In many of their projects, the organizations solicit volunteers to work on social action, for example an NGO-supported youth group was able to influence a private Nablus bus company to start operating a daily bus-line for a remote village. And in an effort to open up job opportunities, local youth NGO 3 initiated a project in which companies or banks employ volunteers for 6 months and then offer a job to at least one of them.

### The fluid conceptualization of being young and “active”

Many of the interviewees (local youth NGOs and two youth political parties) referred to the time of the first intifada, when young people were at the forefront of the uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Being young at that time meant belonging to that part of the society that was taking action. Since the Oslo Accords, however, young people have lost that role and status. Within the constraints of Israeli dominance described above, it is the political parties in charge in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, that are in charge of social or political action: “The parties are not interested in change and in youth participating in it.”<sup>28</sup> The concept of being young seems very fluid. Those active in the political domain spoke about young people as being in their 20s and 30s, possibly even

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with a representative of unconventional youth NGO 1.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with a representative of youth branch of political party 4.

<sup>27</sup> Interviews with representatives of local youth NGO 1 and 3.

<sup>28</sup> Interviews with representatives of local youth NGO 1 and youth branch of political party 4.

in their 40s,<sup>29</sup> while at the same time in the social domain, young people can assume the responsibility for a family in their early 20s (females), late 20s and early 30s (males).

### The influence of international donors

Both the Palestinian youth-led and youth-relevant organizations agree on the need to work on a greater role for youth in political, social and economic life. While that discourse is shared among all organizations and groups interviewed, the director of a local youth NGO explains that it is not whether organizations are youth-led or youth-relevant that makes the difference in Palestine. Rather the difference is in whether the organization was set up as an organization working on the advancement of youth and for the interests of young people, or whether the interest in youth grew out of the fact that organizations saw that “an interest in youth” allows for accessing financial support from international donors.

Internationally supported youth organizations often start from the premise that youth in Palestine are excluded from the decision-making process and they design programmes that aim to enhance youth inclusion in social, economic and political aspects. Such organizations are often able to raise funds for activities that aim to support an increase in youth participation in these domains. The organizations working with youth have very wide objectives, so that they can work with whatever funding becomes available.<sup>30</sup>

However, the extent and success of these activities are often linked to the period and extent of funding attained.<sup>31</sup> In fact, all organizations spoke about projects that “come,” indicating that such projects are not initiated by the organizations themselves, but are the result of a successful response by the organization to a call for proposals. Sometimes, especially when there is an international connection, this leads to a favouring of young people who speak good English.<sup>32</sup> Also local youth NGO 1 admitted that they more often target young people in educational institutions such as universities, than youth who have dropped out of school for example. Perhaps because of the international input through the funding, many projects actively target young women. For example, five of the ten youth centres operated by local youth NGO 4 are located in women’s centres. A major issue in relation to “the projects that come” is the fact that they tend to be donor-driven, time-restricted and budget-steered. One of the organizations’ interviewees admitted to us in confidence:

We are kidding ourselves [...] once we are gone [the time period is finished and/or the budget spent] the activity immediately stops. There are some projects we care about very much and we try to sustain them even when the funding has ended, but we know that once we are not able to continue following up at location, the activity will stop.

An interviewee in a local youth NGO mentioned that many of the newer organizations focus on youth just because it allows them access to funding, while there is no real interest in the welfare, development or needs of young people as a group of the population. Funding does not only lead to activity; organizations also mentioned that it can actually lead to apathy

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<sup>29</sup> Interviews with representatives of local youth NGO 4 and youth branch of political party 4.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a representative from the Higher Council of Youth and Sports (HCYS).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 1.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 3.

on the part of young people. One organization spoke about a project it had worked on, in which exorbitantly high amounts of money had been allocated by a US-funded project to certain activities. It became a problem for the organization how to spend the money in the short periods of time allocated to the activities in the planning document. The informant explained how such issues risk to upset the balance between how organizations can support youth and the space for actual youth initiative. Forcing an organization to spend much more money than needed for an activity tends to corrupt young people and stifle their initiative rather than supporting it. "If young people are made used to get money in order to participate in an activity, they will take it and after that they are no longer interested."<sup>33</sup> Also the general reliance on external funding for their projects makes the youth organizations operate as competitors for these resources, rather than potential cooperating partners for youth development.<sup>34</sup> Some of the interviewees mentioned that they prefer to work with EU funding despite the very complicated bureaucratic process attached to EU projects. Still they see that "most of the European organizations work with the [Palestinian] social organizations as partners - they want to help them to develop and the democracy to develop. They listen to us and they support us." On the other hand some of the US-funded projects supposedly encourage "voluntary" work, "but then they would give 100 dollars and sandwiches etc. and this is actually destroying the voluntary work!"<sup>35</sup>

Some of the NGOs are politically affiliated, and this may cause a certain type of exclusion, where youth affiliated to the party may be favoured over other young people.<sup>36</sup> The interviewees in one specific youth political party went a step further: according to them the organizations that claim to work for youth are not really interested in youth. According to their perception and based on their personal experience with some youth projects, these organizations are interested in implementing their projects so that they can justify their high salaries: "They exploit our energy for their own employment, even the trainings." They were very critical of such organizations and also mentioned that many of these organizations are dependent on funds from international donors, whose ideas influence the programmes of the organizations. For example they tend to apply "normalization" (open relations with Israel): "You might think you are in an activity of this organization and then suddenly you see your picture on Facebook and there are also pictures of the organization working with Israeli youth!" The concern about normalization and its unacceptable imposition when it is not desired or wanted was also mentioned in the focus group discussion with university student council members.

### **The spectrum from Palestinian mainstream organizations to unconventional youth initiatives mobilizing for change**

The main change sought by young and old in Palestinian society is the end to the Israeli occupation. The fact that two intifadas (uprisings) and a series of smaller resistance initiatives have not brought any tangible positive political change, rather the opposite (an almost complete division between the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, as well as a steep increase of Israeli settlement on the West Bank, the continuing siege of the Gaza Strip, and what is called the "judaization" of East Jerusalem), does not encourage organizations

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 1.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 4.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with a representative of youth branch of political party 4.

towards more revolutionary attempts. An “evolutionary” approach towards the end of the occupation (by negotiations) continues to be promoted by US and European leadership. But Palestinians have long since lost confidence in any such effort, as such negotiations have been ongoing since 1995, and the situation has continued to deteriorate rather than improve.

Unexpectedly, a new “revolutionary” protest movement sprang up in October 2015. The very young youth (often still school age, born after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993) taking part in this, although some may be supporters of one organization or another, do not seem to be guided by these organizations. At the time of writing it still remains to be seen whether the opposite may happen: once popular support for these young people’s acts of resistance grows, the political parties may try to “ride the wave.”<sup>37</sup>

In general most NGOs that receive funding from external parties for their projects with youth work within the framework of “evolutionary change.” At the same time, however, there are spontaneous initiatives by young Palestinians that take a more revolutionary approach to achieving social and political change.

Palestinian youth activists have re-organized themselves since the beginning of Israel’s building of the Apartheid Wall in 2002, in weekly protest demonstrations at Bil’in, Nil’in, Nabi Salah and other villages that were threatened to lose land and freedom of movement by the building of the Wall. Such physical popular resistance on the ground is backed up by electronic documentation in the Stop the Wall campaign.<sup>38</sup>

Many young Palestinians are active in social media, like Facebook and Twitter, in order to publicize the oppressive nature of the Israeli siege of the Gaza Strip and the continuing occupation and colonization of the West Bank. An early (2001) independently organized Palestinian media initiative was the Electronic Intifada<sup>39</sup> which covers the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a Palestinian perspective and aims to provide a counterbalance against the generally pro-Israeli reporting in English-language media.

A rather creative, but no less powerful, example of a very specifically oriented popular resistance project was “Love in the Time of Apartheid.” In March 2013, a group of young Palestinian activists with members from the 1948 area as well as members from the West Bank organized a mock marriage at one of the gates in the Apartheid Wall, to call attention to Israel’s restrictions on Palestinian families whose members have different Israeli-imposed identity status.<sup>40</sup>

Another initiative by local youth in Hebron, where Israelis have established a settlement in one of the main neighbourhoods of the city, is “Youth against Settlements.” This initiative “seeks to stop and terminate the Israeli colonial activities (building and expanding settlement) in Palestine through nonviolent popular struggle.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See the website of the Stop the Wall campaign: <http://www.stophthewall.org/the-wall>.

<sup>39</sup> See the Electronic Intifada website: <https://electronicintifada.net>.

<sup>40</sup> See the website of Love in the Time of Apartheid: <http://www.loveinthetimeofapartheid.org/en>.

<sup>41</sup> See the Facebook page of Youth against Settlements: <https://www.facebook.com/media.yas>.



## 5. THE TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT OF ORGANIZED YOUTH IN PALESTINIAN SOCIETY

### The influence of youth organizations on the mainstream political discourse

Youth organizations have very little influence on mainstream political discourse. According to most of the NGO informants, the Higher Council for Youth and Sport (HCYS) and other ministries are not willing to be changed or influenced by youth organizations, although they may pay lip-service to youth involvement. When invited, ministry officials often attend the activities conducted by organizations for youth just as a way of showing up and being in the picture; other times, they do not come even when they are invited.<sup>42</sup> However, they do not come up with any ideas, and even when new ideas are suggested to them, they do not react positively.<sup>43</sup> When organizations consult with the ministries it is more often to gain their endorsement, rather than any real input being expected or received.<sup>44</sup>

University student organizations are considered to be the unofficial youth branches of the political parties they are affiliated with, and are still seen as an important barometer of the political climate in mainstream Palestinian society. Attending the political debate preceding the 2015 student council elections at Birzeit University, we found that on the one hand these student “parties” tend to follow the party line rather closely, while on the other hand all speakers acknowledge that the 2007 political division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is a major challenge to Palestinian politics. Similar to the pre-Oslo era, when any political activity related to PLO parties was forbidden by Israel, now again it is the university student council elections that give an indication of Palestinian society’s support for the various political parties. Whereas there have been no nation-wide elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council since 2006, and since then the West Bank has been ruled by a Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority, the Birzeit University student council elections were won by opposition Hamas. One can say that these youth branches of the political parties are able to make a clear point to the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. But although the Palestinian Authority may acknowledge the outcome of student council elections as a “warning,” this does not lead to a change in discourse or policies, other than that students supporting the Hamas-affiliated student organization are monitored perhaps even more closely by the PA’s security forces. For example, some of the leaders of the winning organization were arrested for brief periods immediately after the elections.

### The influence of young Palestinians on adult-led organizations (political parties, business associations, labour movements and NGOs)

In most of the interviews informants maintained that political parties are not interested in youth, except when it is in the interest of the party. The West Bank ruling party of Fatah is dominated by older men, who are interested in keeping their personal position of power, as well as their “villas, cars and VIP status.”<sup>45</sup> At an awareness workshop organized by a local NGO (8) on political participation of youth, in a discussion on youth influence on the

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<sup>42</sup> Interviews with representatives of local youth NGO 1 and international youth organization (GIZ).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 4.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 1.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a representative of youth branch of political party 4.

political parties, youth were clear that for one thing they are financially dependent on the party administration. One student mentioned that in the end “we are like chess pieces, being moved around by the [leadership of the party] players.” Moreover, in the discussion it became obvious that even though young women seem to participate in the youth political activity at university, in fact these women never reach official positions in these youth branches of the parties. Female students at the workshop complained that their presence only reflects the quota for female participation.

In an interview with two ex-student council members of the Birzeit University,<sup>46</sup> we learned that the youth branch of their party see themselves as somewhat independent from their party leadership, but this entails mostly policies related to students and the university. In terms of influence on government policies, they admitted that they demand more interest in youth, but are always told that there are more important issues, like “we lost the Gaza Strip,” “the occupation,” “the prisoners” and so on. Youth of political party 5 see that only at a time when the bigger political problems are solved youth may expect to receive more attention from their leadership. This confirmed what we had seen when we attended the public debate by candidates previous to the elections. In this debate the students representing the different parties clearly followed the line of the affiliated political party. In fact, quite similar to mainstream politics there was also a lot of mud-slinging to and fro by both the PA dominating and the main opposition-affiliated student bodies.

This main opposition party, however, is in itself a somewhat “younger” party, which in 2006 participated for the first time in the nationwide PLC elections - and won. Its popular support grew to a certain extent out of popular dissatisfaction with the way the main PA party had dominated Palestinian politics, and especially the levels of corruption. Moreover, a number of the older representatives of this main opposition party have been assassinated by Israel over the years.

An interviewee in a smaller opposition party explained that in that party (which defines itself as a political alternative for young people as well as an option for those who do not want to support the two main political parties), the young members come with ideas for activities, and with the approval of the older generation these activities are generally carried out. But the informant made it clear that their base of popular support is too small to make a real difference.

As far as Palestinian businessmen’s associations are concerned, in principle there is no age criterion on membership. However, it is not easy for young entrepreneurs to meet the conditions of the bylaws. For example a new member must have capital of 400,000 dollars or 250,000 Jordanian dinars at his disposal, if he is the director of a company. If he has a private business, he must have at least 100,000 Jordanian dinars in capital. Besides this, reputation is important and an applicant for membership must have at least two favourable references from existing members. The Ramallah Businessmen’s Association has about 250 members, none of them under the age of 30, according to the interviewee. However, besides private business members, the major Palestinian companies and banks are also represented in the Businessmen’s Association, and these representatives tend to be rather young, between the

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with a representative of youth branch of political party 5.

ages of 30-40. These younger members of the association constitute about 40 percent of the total membership and they are the ones who are the most active. In other words, they are able to exert influence, at least at the level of the association's activities and strategies. For example they took the lead in negotiations with the PA for an income tax decrease. They are also very active in establishing links with international business. But in this, he adds, these efforts are often hampered by the political situation. In order to establish cooperation between international business and Palestinian business, these international partners often stipulate that there be an Israeli business component in the project. At that point "we are afraid," he said. "They enter politics, and we cannot be the representatives of a political party of a government. [...] Next thing they may try to make you collaborate."<sup>47</sup>

In a telephone interview with the Businesswomen's Association we learned that, again, in principle there is no discrimination against young women, rather the opposite: the associations see it as one of their goals to encourage young women to engage in the business world. However, the criteria for membership include the condition that the business must employ at least four persons, and the membership candidate must be at least 25 years old.

In principle there is no restriction on young people's participation in labour unions. Even engineering university graduates who are not actively practicing their job can be members in the Union for Engineers. One of the interviewees<sup>48</sup> criticized the workers' movement which does not fight for a safe environment for workers, and there are many reported cases where workers have died in work accidents due to the lack of safe conditions in the workplace. Some unions, however, are more active than others. For example the university employees unions are strong and led by relatively young activists. These unions actively fight for better labour conditions for university employees nationwide. Another example: a series of activities in 2011 by the joint Palestinian university unions led to a decision by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to link salaries to the cost of living index.

Even though some of the NGOs are led by the older generation (e.g., local youth NGO 4), we found that most of the local youth NGOs have a relatively young staff (e.g., local youth NGOs 1 and 3).

### **Young Palestinians' independent initiatives**

There are several examples of young Palestinians taking social collective initiatives, for example "Spiritual Encounters" (Nazareth, Ramallah, Lebanon, Syria) is an example of a religiously motivated social media group, which interlinks young Christians living in the region. It was initiated by a cleric in Nazareth and now includes over 30 groups, with members in the 1948 area, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and people from these countries living in other parts of the world. Besides issues related to religion, they discuss and take action on social issues. An important effect of this initiative, according to an interviewee, is that when Christian groups linked to this initiative visited West Bank group members, they were able to gain a much better understanding of the conditions of Palestinian life on the West Bank. Additionally, the network makes it possible for its members to find hospitality in neighbouring countries. For young Arab Christians living and studying in the West the network also provides an important

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with a representative of Palestinian businessmen's association.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with a representative of youth branch of political party 4.

way to stay connected to their own culture.<sup>49</sup>

Another example of a social youth initiative is Qawarib, a youth charity based mainly in Ramallah, which aims to collect donations for deprived people all over Palestine, and documents the effect of its campaigns on its Facebook page.<sup>50</sup>

In relation to political initiative, we found that in the Palestinian case, students tend to organize along mainstream political lines, with only very small groups organizing themselves in an independent fashion. For example, the Birzeit Students Alliance party develops its own independent political platform, but got only one seat in the student council elections, out of 51.<sup>51</sup>

However, there are several examples of young people's political initiatives beyond the mainstream organizations, and without the support or encouragement of existing NGOs: Youth against Settlements (Hebron), Love in the Time of Apartheid (West Bank, Jerusalem, 1948 Palestinians) and the Stop the Wall campaign (see above for more details). Although the effects of these initiatives on the political situation may be small, they are important in mobilizing the international solidarity movement against the Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip, the occupation of the West Bank and the annexation of East Jerusalem.

### **The support of international youth movements for their Palestinian peers**

Most of interviewees mention that it is regionally and internationally very well known that Palestinian youth are an important political force in the resistance against the Israeli occupation and as such they may have inspired the 2011 youth popular uprisings in other Arab countries. None of them mentioned any specific international youth movement influence on Palestinian youth, although they do acknowledge the importance of the international youth initiatives in support of the Palestinian struggle, for example the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). One interviewee mentioned that international support for Palestinian initiatives, like for example the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, reinforces Palestinian adherence to the initiative and gives a moral boost.

### **The impact of youth organizations on youth employment policies**

Although the youth organizations all state that youth unemployment is one of the main issues of attention, they have their doubts about their ability to influence "youth" employment policies.

Many of the NGOs working with and for youth recognize the problem of youth unemployment, and consequently some of their projects focus on increasing the chances of young people to find employment, through training in writing CVs, how to conduct an interview, project planning and management, fundraising, and even schemes in which two jobseekers volunteer to work for six months at an institution or business with the aim that one of these two will be hired. The limitation of such projects is that they aim to improve the "marketability"

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with a representative of unconventional youth NGO 2.

<sup>50</sup> See Qawarib's Facebook page (in Arabic): <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/Qawarib>.

<sup>51</sup> Birzeit University, *Wafaa' Islamic Bloc Wins Majority in Birzeit University Student Council Elections*, cit.

of young individuals, while they cannot influence the structural problems related to youth unemployment (Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and the consequent restrictions on the economy and society): "Our projects aim at youth participation, but the market wants something else."<sup>52</sup>

In a regional meeting facilitated by a large international youth organization attempting to "organize and facilitate coordination" amongst the many youth organizations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, one participant expressed his frustration: "What will NET-MED Project (2) add to the country? The youth need work and they don't need awareness about work."<sup>53</sup>

Organizations' ability to change PA policies in regard to youth employment is minimal. The fact that several organizations were able to have the PA put the results of the civil service entrance test online is already considered a major achievement.

### **Youth collective agency in relation to family policies, social protection, gender policies, pension schemes, inheritance and personal status laws**

None of the interviewees could give an example of youth collective agency having had an impact on the above-mentioned issues. This does not mean that young people are not aware of such issues, but their inability to give examples is another indication of the primacy of the structural political issue in the minds of young people, namely the Israeli occupation.

### **Migration - "If we could we would..."**

As described in Musleh (2016:12), there is considerable internal migration from the villages to the urban centres Nablus and Hebron in the north and south respectively, and even more generally to the centrally located city of Ramallah where the PA ministries are located as well as the head offices of many financial and entrepreneurial institutions, and local and international NGOs. Nevertheless, many young Palestinians have moved out of the country in search of employment, especially to the Emirates, Qatar and the USA and Canada. In the interviews rough estimates vary from "one third of young people are thinking of emigration as an alternative to living in a society where they cannot participate"<sup>54</sup> to "if we could we would all move!"<sup>55</sup> Also the village youth group participants in a focus group discussion seemed to agree that many young people would emigrate for work, if only it were not so difficult to obtain visas. One interviewee of a local political party said that when Norway had wanted to grant political asylum to young Palestinians, Salam Fayyad (who was the Palestinian Prime Minister at the time) was against it. "I heard this," said the interviewee. "So they don't want us to live and they don't want us to leave."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 1.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 3.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 1.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with a representative of unconventional youth NGO 3.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a representative of youth branch of political party 4.

### Youth and spatial planning

Most interviewees could not give an example of altered spatial planning as a result of youth collective agency. However, one of the organizations<sup>57</sup> was given a 15-year free use of premises in a village between Ramallah and Jerusalem. They renovated the premises and are now also working on the renovating of other structures in the village with the objective that the village community will benefit. For example one of the structures is to house a library. An interviewee from the youth branch of one of the political parties ridiculed the idea of spatial planning being altered as a result of youth collective agency: "This is the least of their priorities. They are not able to solve the unemployment issue and such thing [spatial planning] is not considered at all on their agenda." In the interview with the Ramallah Businessmen's Association, the interviewee explained that issues related to spatial planning are as much influenced by the structural political context, i.e., the Israeli occupation, as everything else. He explained that the Businessmen's Association is approached by the Quartet (who are supposedly "mediating" the "peace process," but apparently bypassing the PA on this) on "development" issues. Such development issues cannot take place if Palestinian business is not involved. For example there are talks about the establishment of a solar energy project which will provide electricity to 100,000 people in the south of the West Bank. Another issue that was discussed was the idea of providing affordable housing for young people. But that requires affordable land, which in the West Bank case would be the land in Area C. This land however is under direct control of Israel. And there ends the discussion.

## 6. PALESTINIAN YOUTH IN RELATION TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

### The influence of youth organizations and movements on Palestinian public sphere before and after 2011

For Palestine the turning point is not 2011. Rather there have been several important milestones that have influenced youth agency in the public sphere. The end of the first intifada, followed by the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, changed how youth influenced the public sphere. And in fact it was during the first intifada, before 1993, that youth had a very strong influence on the public sphere. The period after 1993 was dominated by a short period of hope, which soon gave way to the realization that none of the major political issues (refugees, borders, Jerusalem) had been addressed in the Oslo Accords and at the same time settlements were increasing. Once that became clear youth again played a revolutionary role in the second intifada (2000-2004). The fact that in 2006 a democratically elected government was to such an extent boycotted by the international community that internal fighting ultimately resulted in the Fatah/Hamas (West Bank/Gaza Strip) division, led to an almost general frustration in relation to internal politics, especially for young people. The 2011 events in other SEM countries did not influence the Palestinian situation. Several interviewees stated that the issues in Palestine are very different from the issues related to the popular revolutions in other SEM countries: "We have *two* governments *and* a military occupation to deal with!"<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 3.

<sup>58</sup> Interviews with representatives of unconventional youth NGO 1 and youth branch of political party 5.

## Government policies targeted at youth in response to the regional developments of 2011

According to one interviewee of a local youth NGO, ex-Prime Minister Salam Fayyad showed interest in youth in 2011, “worried that the ‘Arab Spring’ would come here, but that did not last long.”<sup>59</sup> Such initial interest in youth was subsequently followed by an even stronger suppression of youth opposition activity than what had been experienced previously.

When young men go to protest, they - the Palestinian police - arrest them, because they don't want to - they “believe in a peaceful solution.” Because they have agreements with Israel. At the time of the [48,000] march [July 2014], we were also going out to protest the assault on Gaza and we marched peacefully to Beit El [past the Israeli army checkpoint and an Israeli settler colony on Palestinian land], but we could not get further than a certain point, because the Palestinian police were there and they arrested young men and closed all the roads to Beit El.<sup>60</sup>

## 7. SUMMARIZING COMMENTS AND THE PROSPECTS FOR YOUTH-LED CHANGE IN PALESTINE

### The general discourse on youth and how soon it can change...

In the Palestinian context we found that the general discourse in relation to young people is not necessarily negative. Given the important roles young Palestinians have played in the resistance against Israeli domination, young Palestinians enjoy a reputation of being agents of change, both within Palestinian society and internationally. In this qualitative study, which focused largely on the Israeli-occupied West Bank, we found that this generally positive discourse on Palestinian youth had somewhat changed in the past few years, and key informants of youth organizations complained that young Palestinians nowadays only care for their individual situation and have lost interest in working for the community. In most of the interviews researchers were told that the Palestinian youth of today are referred to as “the Facebook generation,” “the coffeeshop generation,” or the *fafiyat* (roughly translated this means something like “not real men”).

How soon a discourse can change, however, became clear in October 2015, when very young Palestinians initiated a new type of resistance against the Israeli occupation. This led almost immediately to a change in societal discourse regarding Palestinian youth. In the interviews conducted in October, combined with observation of Palestinian media reporting, it was clear that society recognized that once again it was the youth who took the forefront in resisting the Israeli occupation. It was also acknowledged in the media that young women are participating in the front lines.<sup>61</sup> To what extent this is the case is not clear, as some of the young men pointed out that when 100 men and two women demonstrate, the cameras will be on the two women.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 5.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with a representative of unconventional youth NGO 3.

<sup>61</sup> “Al Quds Intifada... Girls in the Front Line of the Confrontations” (in Arabic), in *Quds Press*, 25 October 2015, <http://www.qudspress.com/index.php?page=show&id=11611>.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with a representative of local youth NGO 8.

### **A different kind of “exclusion”**

While the Power2Youth project generally seems to assume that youth in the six countries are “excluded” in the economic, social and political domain, this assumption was not confirmed by the study. Although it is true that youth unemployment is high in Palestine, and youth influence on policy change in the economic, social and political domains was generally acknowledged to be low, still informants did not seem to consider youth as “excluded” by society. Rather they linked exclusion to the structural political context, where they considered that on the one hand they are not the only layer of Palestinian society that is subject to many types of exclusion, and that this is shared by the population at large, and on the other hand they conceded that Palestinian society, including the government, has bigger problems to deal with than the inclusion or exclusion of youth.

The Palestine WP2 macro-level study (Musleh 2016) showed that at the Palestinian state level youth programmes and youth policies are not prominent. This is a finding that was confirmed both in the literature review on youth organizations, and in the qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Remarkably, this relative lack of government interest towards youth inclusion in the social, economic and political domains seems to be juxtaposed by a plethora of youth projects organized by the NGO sector.

### **Issues around NGOs working with youth: “The money that comes...”**

Interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic observations exposed several startling aspects in relation to the NGO focus on youth. First, it was surprising to find that the organizations themselves were not happy with the response of youth to their programmes. They complained that “youth are not educated enough,” “youth are not interested,” “youth only care for their individual interest.” This is puzzling, because given that the state sector is lacking in its interest in youth, and NGOs on the other hand are providing opportunities to young people, one would imagine a perfect match. The opposite seemed to be the case. Why? The answer is not a secret, and in fact it was admitted by the key informants of the organizations and expanded upon by young people active in political parties. A key phrase that is prominent in the discourse on youth organization and youth projects is “the money that comes.” This phrase refers to the funding provided by international donors for youth projects. Referring to “money that comes” indicates that this money is neither earned, nor generated by a specific effort. Often this money is “made available” (it “comes”) in a call for proposals. The proposals need to be written in such a way that they respond to the call, rather than responding to what is needed or wanted by young people in Palestinian society. Although both the funding agency and the receiving organization may have the best intentions, these projects tend to be time-limited, donor-driven and unsustainable, as an interviewee from one of the largest youth organizations explained (“We are kidding ourselves”). Even more blunt was the assessment of some informants who are members of political organizations, and who saw these NGO projects as representing the perspectives and objectives of the international community instead of the needs and perspectives of Palestinian society. Although there are of course some young people who participate in these programmes and benefit at an individual level, Palestinian student activists claimed that young people are suspicious of such projects; they regard them in the best case as not offering anything in terms of tangible development and in the worst case as “exploiting our energy to justify the organization’s employees’ well-paid jobs or aimed at normalization” (allowing for relations with Israel). A similar point was



made in relation to “development” in general, an issue that involves Palestinian business but also international business. The international community tends to put pressure on Palestinians to on the one hand “normalize” relations with Israel, while on the other hand such “normalization” is completely at odds with the political reality where Israel is eating away the very ground on which the Palestinian state is supposed to be built (Salingue 2015).

### What lies ahead...

Summarizing the main findings of the study, the concept of “exclusion” for Palestinians refers to the complete society, not only young people. NGO informants as well as young Palestinians active in political or more unconventional movements acknowledge that the main constraint on youth as well as societal development lies in the persisting Israeli military occupation and colonization of the West Bank, the siege of the Gaza Strip, the domination of East Jerusalem, and the international community’s inability to exert pressure towards a political solution. While the international community intends to support youth development through its financial support of NGOs working with youth, the findings cast doubt on the ability of such programmes to support tangible change for Palestinian youth as a collective entity. The worry that some of these projects actually have the opposite effect, corrupting young people by overfunding relatively simple activities, should be taken seriously. Sustainability and the ability of these projects to enhance policy change towards youth participation is minimal, and within the structural oppression by Israel, the meaning of the projects and the organizations themselves may not extend far beyond the limited (self) employment these organizations and projects generate. As one informant from a youth branch of a political party said: “The youth must build themselves: they cannot wait for the organization.” At the time of writing, the latest wave of Palestinian popular resistance, the *habbeh*, continues. Very young Palestinians, often accused of trying to stab a soldier or Israeli, are shot dead at point blank range. But can a Palestinian girl of 13 really be a threat to an army that is among the best equipped in the world? Even UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon considers the wave of attacks (by very young Palestinian boys and girls armed with knives only, if armed at all) as driven by a “profound sense of alienation and despair” among some Palestinians, particularly the young. Speaking at a meeting of the Security Council on 26 January 2016, Ban Ki-moon added:

Palestinian frustration is growing under the weight of a half century of occupation and the paralysis of the peace process. [...] Yet, as oppressed peoples have demonstrated throughout the ages, it is human nature to react to occupation, which often serves as a potent incubator of hate and extremism (UN 2016).

There does not seem to be any specific political Palestinian faction behind this latest wave of young people’s “attacks” against the Israeli occupation. These children and youth often pay with their lives. At the same time being politically engaged also remains a risky business for young Palestinians. The elected president of the Birzeit University student council, who had originally been very cooperative in arranging a focus group discussion with student council members in August 2015, became evasive when we wanted to arrange a personal interview with him in early October. In December 2015, he was arrested by the Israelis, along with four other student council members.

This Palestinian component of the regional comparative Power2Youth study can only conclude that it is the Israeli military occupation that remains the dominant power *against* Palestinian youth. Attempts by young Palestinians to participate and take an active role in assuming power are too often paid by their lives or their freedom.

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*POWER2YOUTH is a research project aimed at offering a critical understanding of youth in the South East Mediterranean (SEM) region through a comprehensive interdisciplinary, multi-level and gender sensitive approach. By combining the economic, political and socio-cultural spheres and a macro (policy/institutional), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) level analysis, POWER2YOUTH explores the root causes and complex dynamics of the processes of youth exclusion and inclusion in the labour market and civic/political life, while investigating the potentially transformative effect of youth collective and individual agency. The project has a cross-national comparative design with the case studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Turkey. POWER2YOUTH's participants are 13 research and academic institutions based in the EU member states, Norway, Switzerland and South East Mediterranean (SEM) countries. The project is mainly funded under the European Union's 7th Framework Programme.*

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