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Towards Practical Strategies to Overcome the Identity and Thinking Crisis Among Palestinian Youth After October 7

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Within a project

**Palestinian Civil Society contributes actively to Shaping
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The views in this paper reflect the researchers' views and do not necessarily reflect the views of PalThink for Strategic Studies or the donor.

Introduction

This paper addresses the shifts in the attitudes of Palestinian youth after the events of October 7, highlighting the impact of the Israeli aggression on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and its implications on the culture and political and social participation of Palestinian youth. It also reviews the psychological and social challenges they face, with a focus on the phenomenon of "chaotic thinking" that affected national identity and future orientations, leading young people to different choices between frustration and involvement in armed resistance.

Frustration and anger led some youth to adopt more militant attitudes towards the conflict, while others resorted to what they called "enforced silence"¹, driven by fear and oppression, a silence that could explode at any moment, influenced by the scenes of violence and destruction broadcast by traditional media and social media, which they followed addictively during the war, exacerbating the state of collective anger. This was especially evident with the increasing use of narratives that emphasize resistance and martyrs, which reinforced radicalized attitudes among youth.

In the Gaza Strip, the post-October 7 transformations have had profound effects on notions of education, health, political participation, and conflict relations with Israel. Palestinian youth witnessed a change in their perception of events, especially as their trust in official institutions and bodies, whether local or international, declined as a result of what they perceived as their inability to respond to their national and political requirements.

Through focus groups conducted in Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, and the Gaza Strip, the paper sheds light on the impact of these transformations on Palestinian youth in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, calling for a

¹ Enforced silence refers to the compelled suppression of expressing opinions and positions due to political, social, or psychological pressures, or as a result of direct repression. This silence may arise either from fear of potential consequences or from an internal conflict between personal convictions and imposed realities.

The psychological effects of enforced silence can be profound, leading to stress, anxiety, and identity disturbances, as individuals feel compelled to conceal their true thoughts. It can also contribute to mental confusion and a state of "cognitive chaos," where young people experience a contradiction between their beliefs and what they are allowed to express. On a political level, enforced silence may push individuals to adopt a double discourse or seek alternative, indirect forms of expression such as art, music, or cultural symbols. It can also manifest as a sense of internal alienation, where individuals feel disconnected from their authentic selves and the views they can publicly express, ultimately affecting their social and political engagement.

reconsideration of policies related to them. The study examines the impact of political, social, and economic conditions on the formation of youth identity and attitudes towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Addressing these challenges is essential to promote social and psychological stability, consolidate national identity, and prevent the exacerbation of economic crises that may lead youth to migration or unstable options. The weak participation of youth in the political decision-making process exacerbates their marginalization, necessitating their reintegration into the political and social scene to ensure a more stable future.

Empowering Palestinian youth and enhancing their role in society is a key pillar of steadfastness and resistance in all its forms. Palestinian statistical data indicate that on the eve of the Israeli war on Gaza, the West Bank and Gaza Strip were home to about 5.6 million Palestinians, including about 1.2 million young men and women between the ages of 18 and 29, equivalent to 22% of the total population in Palestine.²

The statistics also show a slight advantage in the percentage of youth in the West Bank (22%) compared to the Gaza Strip (21%), highlighting the demographic gap between the two regions. These figures reflect the importance of Palestinian youth demographics and their central role in influencing the political and social scene, both locally and internationally. According to estimates, the population growth rate in the Gaza Strip is expected to decrease from 2.7% in 2023 to 1% in 2024, due to a decrease in birth rates. Many couples have become reluctant to have children due to the current situation, in addition to a significant decrease in new marriages during the Israeli aggression.³

The repercussions of the Gaza War on youth in the West Bank

The Gaza War has had profound effects on Palestinian society, including social, political, and economic pressures. The ongoing Israeli aggression has exacerbated anxiety and depression among youth, reinforcing their sense of fear about the future. During the FGDs, West Bank youth expressed their fears of the "unknown" as Israeli violations, such as

² [2] International Youth Day 2024: A Study on Palestinian Youth, Gaza Tracker, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4t3w2d9z>.

³ [3] International Youth Day 2024: A Study on Palestinian Youth, Gaza Tracker, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4t3w2d9z>.

annexation plans and arrests, continue, adding to the instability and daily threats they face.

These fears reflect the results of opinion polls conducted in the West Bank, where the percentage of those who believe the situation is going in the wrong direction rose from 59% to 79%. This growing pessimism is mainly due to the deteriorating political, security, and economic situation, with 82% of respondents reporting a deterioration in their economic situation and 88% expressing concern that the security situation has worsened compared to the previous year.⁴ It is important to examine the relationship between war and conflict on the one hand, and attitudes towards peace and settlement on the other, as there have been changes in young people's thinking regarding security, identity, and relations with the occupation, along with increased discussion about peace and human rights, and an enhanced sense of patriotism and a desire for security.

An opinion poll on the attitudes of Palestinian youth in the West Bank shows that the youth group is divided into three main groups. The first group, the politically engaged group, constitutes no more than 30% of the respondents and is characterized by the highest rate of political participation, whether through demonstrations and sit-ins or by using the media to promote party positions, whether in favor of armed resistance factions or factions that support the peace process. The second category, which constitutes 60 percent of the youth, is the category of observers, who follow political affairs with interest but are not directly involved in any political activity. On the other hand, the third category, apathetic youth, represents about 20 percent of respondents, who prefer to focus on personal interests such as sports, commerce, and the pursuit of quick earning opportunities, away from the political scene.

Transformations in Political Participation and Resistance after October 7 in the Gaza Strip

After the events of October 7, the attitudes of Palestinian youth in the Gaza Strip changed, as the level of political and military participation was high among Islamist-oriented youth who were the “fuel for the resistance

⁴ [4] Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD). Results of the Palestinian Public Opinion Survey in the West Bank and Gaza Strip - November 2024: Press Release. December 21, 2024. <https://www.awrad.org/files/flash/21.12.2024.البيان%20الصحفي.pdf>.

factions”⁵. With the repercussions of the Israeli aggression and the subsequent martyrdom and injury of thousands and the destruction of 80% of the Gaza Strip, many young people began looking for alternative ways to resist the occupation, beyond military solutions to more sustainable peaceful strategies. However, these trends also reflect a state of uncertainty, as young people feel that their political participation is being used as a mere tool in the political scene, without having a real role in decision-making or influencing political institutions such as parties, the Palestinian Authority, or the Legislative Council. Before October 7, Palestinian youth were the backbone of the resistance and the fuel for political parties, and a large percentage of youth were on the side of the resistance, but after October 7, the youth's perception of events changed and they felt that they “had no support, no international community, and no Arab community to support them in confronting the occupation force,” and thus became believers that there are other tools for resistance other than the military solution, i.e. with a peaceful solution.

There is no doubt that Palestinian youth in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank share a common denominator: a sense of failure on the part of the international community, but their attitude toward adopting the military option to resist the occupation is quite different. In the West Bank, this option has not declined; on the contrary, Israel's aggression against the Gaza Strip contributed to its popularity and support. On the contrary, in the Gaza Strip, the popularity of the military option has declined in favor of peaceful approaches. This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that youth in the West Bank have not been exposed to direct violence and bombardment as youth in the Gaza Strip have experienced.

The rise in political religiosity among youth in the West Bank after October 7

One of the most prominent effects that emerged after October 7 among Palestinian youth in the West Bank is the rise in political religiosity, which reflects the use of religion in the political sphere, whether through discourse, policies, legislation, or social practices. This concept emerges in contexts where religious identities overlap with political affiliations, so that "religion becomes a source of political legitimacy or a tool for mobilizing

⁵ (5) Ahmed Adwan, personal interview conducted by the researcher in Gaza, February 18, 2025.

and influencing public opinion⁶." Among them, it is no longer limited to girls, but also among the youth, who find in religious discourse a refuge and a source of hope, especially in light of the resistance discourse of Hamas, which combines religious legitimacy with militancy. Despite the increase in the religious dimension among youth, they did not agree on a religious role model to follow, as there were many names of religious figures in the dialog sessions, with no consensus on one Palestinian or even Arab religious figure. This is an indication that religiosity has become more individualized, as individuals choose the sources of reception according to their convictions and an indication of a rejection of traditional ideologies. The high level of religiosity among youth after October 7 can also be interpreted as an indication of the youth's declining trust in other institutions, such as the government or international bodies that can help alleviate economic, political, and psychological insecurity.

Paradoxically, the researcher found during the focus groups that there is no strong and clear relationship between the percentage of religiosity and the attitude towards resistance, Hamas and Jihad. For example, a large number of participants in the focus groups did not classify themselves as religious or religiously committed in terms of dress and behavior, but they express themselves as supporters of the option of armed resistance adopted by Hamas. On the other hand, the researcher noted that some Palestinian youth said that "the events of October 7 increased their religiosity, while their attraction to politics and political activities and their participation in them decreased." Some participants felt that the exploitation of religion in politics contributed to the deterioration of the situation and strengthened the conflict between religious and national identity. One supported the military resistance for defending the Palestinian people, but criticized the attack that led to the war, noting that it was important to "carefully analyze its consequences before deciding to carry it out." ⁷Another participant argued that blaming the Palestinian resistance for the consequences of the October 7 attack is a fallacy, arguing that the attack is a natural consequence of the struggle between colonizer and colonized and Israel's policies. The focus groups in the West Bank showed that some young people have moved from a state of "disinterest in religious matters" to

⁶ (6) John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 393.

⁷ N. T., a youth participant in the discussion groups in Ramallah on February 10, 2025, who preferred to remain anonymous; thus, only initials are used.

religiosity and spirituality, and sometimes to support resistance that adopts Islamic rhetoric. This shift was reinforced by media reports of increased religiosity among Palestinian youth after October 7.⁸ During dialogue sessions organized in Ramallah, for example, some young people said they have turned their support towards the more radical organizations towards the conflict, due to the inability of traditional factions to achieve their goals. They attributed this silent shift to the difficulty of solidarity with the Gaza Strip due to security challenges and Israeli arrests, as a number of social media solidarity activists have been arrested. Some pointed out that the conflict has become a "religious conflict," especially after Israeli leaders used religious rhetoric to justify their actions, such as invoking the story of Amalek from the Old Testament.⁹

Decline in political religiosity among youth in the Gaza Strip after October 7

In the Gaza Strip, the level of political religiosity among youth declined after the events of October 7, as shown by their reactions in the focus groups. They lost confidence in political parties, and considered that their political participation did not fulfill their rights before the events of October 7, which reinforced their tendency to reject political parties in general after that.¹⁰ Many participants in the focus groups in Gaza expressed their rejection of what happened on October 7, believing that the situation "exceeded their ability to endure." They pointed to the role of the media and social media in reinforcing this idea. They considered the media to be "living in a state of absence from the tragic reality of the people," and focused on "portraying heroism while ignoring the suffering of the people, especially the youth, in light of the harsh conditions they live under¹¹". After the devastating war, the political alternative remains unclear for youth in the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, youth see the military option and resistance as the only way to stop Israeli arrogance, due to the "failed peace experiments" and the lack of a real Israeli partner for peace.

⁸ Al-Aqsa Flood and Religious Revival: An Islamic Awakening?, Al Jazeera Net, August 13, 2024, <https://shorturl.at/bKMW6>.

⁹ Opinion of a Palestinian youth participant in the discussion groups at the Arab American University in Ramallah on February 3, 2025.

¹⁰ Opinion of a Palestinian youth participant in the discussion groups in Gaza on February 10, 2025.

¹¹ Interview with a discussion group participant on the role of media in conflict and the impact of war coverage on youth.

The impact of wars and personal experiences on the attitudes of youth in the West Bank towards the occupation and conflict

Personal experiences of war and violence significantly affect individuals' attitudes towards conflict. People who are exposed to direct violence, especially in military operations, tend to adopt hostile attitudes towards the other side, weakening their support for peaceful solutions. A study showed that civilians who experience war-related violence are less supportive of diplomatic negotiations or peace.¹² Chronic exposure to political violence promotes psychological distress and increases the tendency of individuals to adopt hardline positions, which reduces their support for political solutions or compromises. This creates a vicious cycle of violence and ideological rigidity. Over time, this may lead individuals to rethink the feasibility of continuing the conflict and using weapons to resolve it, especially if there is a mutual sense of pain and the inability to resolve it militarily. Societies that experience prolonged violence may either radicalize or adopt pragmatic policies to end the conflict. With regard to the first view, for example, a study by a number of researchers on the impact of combat experience on the political attitudes of former Israeli army fighters, particularly with regard to war and peace, revealed that exposure and involvement in combat increased the hardening of attitudes towards the opponent and reduced support for negotiation and compromise, and more importantly, these attitudes translate into voting behavior¹³: Fighters are more likely to vote for more militant parties. Direct experiences of conflict can reinforce hardline attitudes or, conversely, increase support for peaceful solutions, depending on context and personal experience.

In dialogue sessions with Palestinian youth, one of the participants asked a logical question about the reason for continuing the peace process adopted by some Palestinian factions, which has not achieved tangible results, especially since their generation was born during the Oslo Accords and did not see any fruits of this peace. This question reflects young people's

¹² Grossman, Guy, Devorah Manekin, and Dan Miodownik. The Political Legacies of Combat: Attitudes Toward War and Peace Among Israeli Ex-Combatants. *International Organization* 69, no. 4 (2015): 981–1009. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831500020X>.

¹³ Grossman, Guy, Devorah Manekin, and Dan Miodownik. The Political Legacies of Combat: Attitudes Toward War and Peace Among Israeli Ex-Combatants. *International Organization* 69, no. 4 (2015): 981–1009. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831500020X>.

frustration with the peace process, as they see it as not bringing about tangible improvements in their lives or in the Palestinian cause. When asked whether Israel has succeeded in “cauterizing” Palestinian youth through its military operations in Gaza, the majority of respondents (90%) refused to change their positions, continuing to support the military resistance regardless of faction. Despite the horrific scenes of destruction and killing, they insisted on the option of resistance, while the discussion showed that girls in the West Bank had more enthusiasm for this option, despite the risks and difficult conditions in the region.¹⁴ Thus, it can be believed that the feeling of powerlessness, weakness and threat are feelings that people seek to alleviate by self-defense and self-protection, refusing to make concessions or compromises, and adopting military options.

The views of Palestinian youth in this context intersected with studies and theories of conflict resolution that emphasize that ongoing conflicts not only affect the mental health of individuals, but also deepen barriers to peace by creating generations with more radical attitudes¹⁵. During the dialog sessions, the idea of establishing a new political party in Palestine was raised.

One of the central questions about the party's goals was its stance on recognizing Israel. The vast majority of the youth rejected the idea of the new party recognizing Israel. Only two percent of the participants supported the idea of the new party recognizing Israel as a de facto entity “without legally recognizing Israel's control over the land of Palestine.” Raed al-Dabai, a political activist in Nablus, believes that Palestinian youth after October 7 face great challenges, such as the struggle of identities and priorities, and believes that their support for military resistance, especially the Hamas experience, is due to the absence of another political alternative and the absence of a model for confronting Israeli aggression.¹⁶

He believes that the option of nonviolent resistance has declined, and that other Palestinian factions lack a clear political program. Although Gaza's youth initially supported the military option, current challenges and Israeli

¹⁴ Contribution from a youth participant in the focused discussions in Nablus on February 8, 2025. +

¹⁵ Hirsch-Hoefler, Sivan, Daphna Canetti, Carmit Rapaport, and Stevan E. Hobfoll. Conflict Will Harden Your Heart: Exposure to Violence, Psychological Distress, and Peace Barriers in Israel and Palestine. *British Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 4 (2016): 845–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123414000374>.

¹⁶ Al-Daba'i, Raed. Interview with Raed Al-Daba'i, General Director of Budur Development Association. Nablus, February 2025.

policies are leading to a decline in support for Hamas. In the West Bank, resistance operations are often individual or small cells with no organization or political program, which makes him believe that youth trends are “an emotional wave that will recede over time.” He adds that Hamas has realized the decline in its popularity and has employed prisoner releases in a media way to gain popularity by employing symbolism and directing the scene in a way that shows defiance, steadfastness and control.¹⁷

A poll conducted by the Ramallah-based Arab World Center for Research and Development (AWRAD) indicates that the military assessment and support for Hamas's performance dropped from 76 percent in November 2023 to 55 percent in May.¹⁸ The center noted that there are deep disparities between the attitudes of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, as the positive assessment of Hamas' performance during the ongoing war reached 76 percent among West Bank respondents, but only 24 percent among Gaza respondents¹⁹. The disparity in support for Hamas between the West Bank and Gaza can be explained by the impact of direct experience of the conflict, with Gazans suffering from destruction, killing, and forced displacement.

The impact of wars and personal experiences on the attitudes of youth in the Gaza Strip towards the occupation and conflict

In the Gaza Strip, the youth surveyed showed a greater inclination towards peaceful solutions, contradicting the prevailing idea that direct exposure to violence increases hostility towards the other side. On the contrary, their long and repeated suffering seems to have led them to seek solutions that end the cycle of war rather than fuel it. These young people link their ongoing suffering to the successive wars that have led to massive destruction in Gaza, including the destruction of homes, loss of family members, and deterioration of infrastructure, making Gaza an unlivable environment.

¹⁷ Al-Daba'i, Raed. Interview with Raed Al-Daba'i, General Director of Budur Development Association. Nablus, February 2025.

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/c84j39enl3wo>

Because of these harsh conditions, many young people in Gaza have become inclined towards peaceful solutions, emphasizing that peace and stability are the only way out of this ongoing crisis. They believe that military solutions are no longer feasible in light of the constant destruction and threats to their lives, which has reinforced their belief that ending the war and building a stable future requires adopting peaceful policies away from military escalation.

What characterizes this vision is the complexity of the relationship between violent experience and political orientations, as some young people who lived through long years of violence have come to see peaceful solutions as better opportunities to achieve change, while others see that military solutions may be the only alternative in light of the continued Israeli aggression.²⁰

Fragmentation and the search for identity between religion and politics: The Crisis of Belonging Among Palestinian Youth After October 7"

Palestinian youth in the West Bank suffer from fragmentation in their political choices, as they face a conflict between their national identity and their religious identity, in addition to their desire for a stable life and self-development away from wars and conflicts. This is reflected in their interventions, which reflect a deep crisis of belonging, between belonging to their national cause, their religious identity, or their personal future. One student in Ramallah expressed her desire to “live and enjoy her youth like the rest of the world's youth²¹.” This crisis manifests itself in the form of social withdrawal of the youth, the apathetic category described at the beginning of the paper, or excessive involvement in political or religious activity, represented by the engaged category.

One of the most prominent examples of identity conflict is the youth's response to the researcher's request to prioritize and categorize their identities between Islamic, Arab, and Palestinian. The conflict of identities emerged when a large number of youth, more than half, chose to identify themselves as Palestinian first, Muslim second, and Arab last. For some,

²⁰ Summary of the views of youth participants in the discussion groups organized in Gaza between February 10–15, 2025.

²¹ Contribution from a young woman in Ramallah who participated in the focused discussion groups held in Ramallah on February 23, 2025.

the Islamic identity took precedence over the Palestinian and Arab identities, while for others, the Islamic identity took precedence over the Palestinian and Arab identities. In the West Bank, youth attributed their Palestinian identity to their feeling that “the Arabs have failed them in this war and that the Arabs and Arab regimes have not given anything to the Palestinian cause, while their Islamic identity was not chosen by them.” The desire for change and reform dominated the discussions of the Palestinian youth, who expressed their aspiration for freedom and dignity, but seemed hesitant about the means to achieve this in the absence of a unified leadership. Their visions varied between armed resistance, peaceful resistance, or even emigration. Surprisingly, the majority of youth, especially females, emphasized their adherence to staying in the West Bank despite the occupation and crises, considering emigration an indirect response to Israeli displacement plans, reflecting a growing awareness of the dangers of forced displacement. This opinion is contrary to previous polls and statistics that indicated that 20% of Palestinian youth in the West Bank want to emigrate²², while youth in the Gaza Strip find it difficult to define their national identity because they feel they have become tools for use, not participants in political decisions, and there was no participation in political parties, the PA, or the Legislative Council.²³

Declining trust in the political system and Palestinian factions: the crisis of identity and political legitimacy in light of the division and social challenges

The attitudes of the youth who participated in the dialogue sessions, whether in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, reflect a state of deep frustration and abandonment of peaceful solutions as a result of declining trust in the international community and the Palestinian factions. They feel that the proposed solutions are based on the balance of "power" rather than justice. They have expressed their distrust of Western calls for human rights and democracy, especially after the international silence on the crimes in Gaza. In light of the Palestinian division between Hamas and Fatah, especially with the factions' media rhetoric conflicting with the

²² The Concerning Phenomenon in Palestine., Al Jazeera, January 15, 2011.

<https://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/2011/1/15/>. الظاهرة المقلقة في فلسطين.

²³ Ahmed Adwan, personal interview conducted by the researcher in Gaza on February 18, 2025.

reality experienced by the youth, these factors have contributed to the growing chaos of thinking among them.

They also expressed a decline in their confidence in the political factions and the Palestinian political system, especially in light of the inconsistency between the media discourse of the factions and the reality experienced by the youth, which deepened the chaotic thinking and fragmentation.

The Palestinian division (between Hamas and Fatah) contributed to the emergence of goals, strategies and programs for two geographical areas. In their opinion, the division “weakened the Palestinian national identity and created multiple and contradictory Palestinian messages and goals, and thus the Palestinian cause became hostage to internal differences.” This was reflected in the loss of confidence in these factions and their ability to represent their national aspirations. In the Gaza Strip, they believe that the political division between Hamas was and remains one of the “worst things that have happened to the Palestinian cause and put it at risk,” making the Palestinian political system prey to the Israeli occupation on the one hand, and on the other hand, putting the Palestinian national project in the wind. This in turn led to political rivalry and rivalry that made the Palestinian people a victim of it, and a tool for the occupation to exploit the fragility of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza to impose a severe siege on the Gaza Strip, exhausting the economic situation and deteriorating living conditions, which led to a gradual increase in youth unemployment over 17 years, an increase in the crime rate and the erosion of strong social values. The repeated wars on the Gaza Strip have also made it a hostile environment. All these factors have contributed to the intellectual fragmentation of the youth and their quest for emigration and individual salvation in search of a decent life.

1. Gaza's youth believe that the absence of Palestinian elections since 2006 "has dealt a profound blow to the concept of political legitimacy in the Palestinian territories. In the absence of any electoral process that reflects the will of the people," a widespread feeling has taken root among Palestinians that the political leadership "no longer represents them. This has led to widespread frustration among citizens who see the political system as "a means of perpetuating factional interests rather than serving the national

interest²⁴.” The views of Gaza's youth on the impact of the division are consistent with the results of a survey conducted by the Arab Barometer Foundation's eighth Arab Barometer survey of 2024, which shows that 60% of Gazans do not trust the political leadership, reflecting the collective frustration and loss of confidence in the system's ability to meet the aspirations of the people. The ongoing blockade and prolonged conflict have contributed to widespread poverty and unemployment, especially among the youth. According to the World Bank, the unemployment rate in Gaza has reached 50 percent, while youth unemployment has reached 70 percent. This situation has prompted young people to seek job opportunities and develop their skills to build a prosperous Palestinian society.²⁵

In the West Bank, the internal Palestinian divide and the lack of political solutions have caused young people to lose confidence in society and leadership, reinforcing their sense of isolation and escaping to new interests away from politics and national issues. Despite the growing popularity of military resistance among young people adopted by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, participants criticized the two movements for “monopolizing the decision of peace and war” and marginalizing “the institution of the PLO because it enjoys international legitimacy.”

A number of respondents, especially academics, believe that the official Palestinian institution is the one responsible for launching initiatives for national reconciliation and Palestinian reunification, especially after the bloody war on the Gaza Strip and the so-called post-war projects. In the same context, the survey conducted by AWRAD Center revealed low satisfaction with the performance of the Palestinian leadership, with only 29% expressing satisfaction with President Mahmoud Abbas, while 71% are dissatisfied, mainly due to the absence of a clear vision after the

²⁴ Contribution from a politically active participant in the focused discussion sessions held in Gaza on February 22, 2025.

²⁵ Omar Shaban, Gazans' Perceptions of the Future Governance System: Clear Divergences and High Aspirations, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://zt.ms/Irk3>.

aggression on Gaza and poor communication with the public. According to the poll results.²⁶

A large number of young people said that the Palestinian government is “weak” and seeks to achieve priorities far from the priorities of the Palestinian street, as well as ‘undemocratic’ and excludes them from political participation, which increases their deprivation of their rights and disappointment, thus “the concepts of belonging to the clan, family and group returned at the expense of belonging to the unified political system.”

The reluctance to engage in political participation is not a new phenomenon in Palestinian society; rather, it is a recurring issue that dates back to the early formation of the Palestinian political system. A survey conducted by Sharek Youth Forum and MAS Institute reveals a significant decline in political participation among Palestinian youth. The data indicate that youth disengagement in both the West Bank and Gaza is primarily linked to a lack of trust in political factions and the ongoing internal division between Fatah and Hamas. The study also highlights that young people feel incapable of effecting change, reflecting a broader absence of political vision. Feelings of frustration are particularly pronounced in cities and refugee camps compared to rural areas, underscoring the significant challenges of rebuilding trust in Palestinian political institutions.[1]

The absence of Palestinian legislative and presidential elections since 2006 has further deepened the legitimacy crisis of the Palestinian political system and fueled growing frustration. Many perceive the political system as a tool for entrenching factional interests rather than serving national interests. One participant noted²⁷, “If legislative and presidential elections had been held every four years as stipulated in the Oslo Agreement, we would have seen more than 520 Palestinian leaders and legislators forming

²⁶ Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD). Results of the Palestinian Public Opinion Survey in the West Bank and Gaza Strip - November 2024. <https://www.awrad.org//files/flash/>

²⁷ Sharek Youth Forum. Palestinian Youth and Organizations: From Entrepreneurial Engagement in Political Organizations to Fear and Disappointment. Sharek Youth Forum. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://masader.ps/ar/media/news/2663>.

new political, economic, and social elites that contribute to the development of Palestinian society. We would have also witnessed four different Palestinian presidents over this period.”]a youth activist from Nablus participating in a focus group discussion stated²⁸, “The dominance of elderly leadership within Palestinian factions and the marginalization of youth exacerbate the generational gap. This dynamic pushes young people toward radicalization and extreme rhetoric, making them fuel for futile conflicts rather than empowering them to shape the future.”²⁹

International calls to exclude Hamas from governing Gaza, coupled with displacement schemes and threats to purchase land for investment projects, along with the marginalization of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), have raised concerns among Palestinian youth. They view these developments as evidence of the failure to leverage armed struggle effectively in political negotiations. They emphasize that armed resistance alone is insufficient to achieve national objectives and must be complemented by diplomatic and political efforts³⁰

Participants also linked the situation to the growing influence of Arab states over the Palestinian cause. One participant pointed out that the marginalization of the PLO and the exclusion of Palestinian leadership from recent meetings in Riyadh indicate the organization’s weakened position and the increasing dominance of Arab decision-making in Palestinian affairs.

In Gaza, perspectives on political parties mirror those in the West Bank. Many believe that Palestinian factions continue to adopt rigid positions and strategies that obstruct efforts to reorganize the Palestinian political landscape and achieve national reconciliation. These challenges are

²⁸ Contribution from a Palestinian youth participant in a discussion workshop at the Arab American University on February 19, 2025.

²⁹ Contribution from the young activist M.N., one of the participants in the focused discussion groups from Nablus

³⁰ Contribution from a participant in the discussion groups in Jenin when asked about the role of Palestinian political parties in the current political landscape.

compounded by Israeli occupation policies, which are actively implementing displacement plans with full U.S. support, posing severe threats to the future of the Palestinian cause.

Despite these difficulties, youth in Gaza remain optimistic about the post-war period, hoping it will mark the beginning of meaningful political reform. They believe the deeply divided Palestinian political system, coupled with declining citizen participation, necessitates urgent structural changes. According to a 2023 public opinion poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 72% of respondents in Gaza reported losing confidence in the Palestinian political system due to the Fatah-Hamas division.

Youth emphasize the need to build a new political system that includes all factions and social components, ensuring fair representation of youth and women through transparent elections. Regarding Gaza's reconstruction, they call for an independent technocratic government under the PLO's umbrella—one that enjoys both international and domestic legitimacy, free from factional interests. Additionally, they advocate for a comprehensive national conference to achieve reconciliation and reform the political system, focusing on unifying Palestinian factions within an inclusive national framework that respects political and ideological diversity.

Economic challenges in conflict zones significantly influence how individuals perceive conflict resolution mechanisms. Economic crises can act as a double-edged sword, either pushing toward pragmatic solutions for stability or fueling radical tendencies that reject any form of settlement, particularly when the economy is used as a tool for controlling individuals. The impact of these crises is intertwined with other factors, including political repression, regional and international solidarity, and the ability of elites to present convincing solutions to the public. This is especially relevant when the occupation is seen as the primary cause of economic hardship or when political elites are accused of mismanagement and corruption.

Over the past three weeks, discussions with Palestinian youth have addressed the economic consequences of the events of October 7 and the Israeli assault on Gaza. The war has severely impacted the Palestinian economy, with 144,000 jobs lost in the West Bank and 148,000 Palestinian

laborers³¹ denied access to their workplaces inside Israel.[1] Given these realities, economic pressures, unemployment, and poverty have dominated the agenda in focus group discussions, reinforcing a sense of despair among Palestinian youth and driving some toward more hardline positions.

The economic challenges facing Palestinian youth have been exacerbated by the October 7 events, particularly as unemployment rates in the West Bank continue to rise, financial aid to the Palestinian Authority declines, and Israel prevents over 225,000 Palestinian ³²workers from reaching their jobs inside the Green Line. A previous survey titled Youth in Palestine[2] highlighted the significant role economic conditions play in shaping individuals' perceptions of their future in both the West Bank and Gaza. The survey found that 52% of respondents feared losing their jobs or income sources, while 25% expressed concerns about crime. These figures reflect the instability of both the economic and security situations, further deepening uncertainty in Palestinian society³³

Palestinian youth face severe economic difficulties, with approximately 50,000 new job seekers entering the market annually, while only 5,000 opportunities become available. This has pushed the overall unemployment rate to 39%, reaching 51% among university graduates. Beyond the Israeli occupation, Palestinian youth identified corruption, a lack of job opportunities, and high unemployment rates as their most pressing challenges.

In Gaza, Israeli occupation policies and ongoing military aggression remain major obstacles for youth. The situation has worsened due to recurrent wars and the long-standing economic blockade, further complicating the socioeconomic landscape. These factors have directly

³¹ A Year Since the October 7 Events: A Preliminary Reading of Its Repercussions, Trends Research and Advisory, last updated 2024, <https://trendsresearch.org/ar/insight/>. عام-من-أحداث-7-أكتوبر-قراءة-أولية-في-تدا.

³² Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Changes in Palestinian Youth Interests: Religion, Economy, and Politics. Friedrich Ebert Library, 2021. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fespal/20170.pdf>.

³³ Ghassan, International Youth Day 2024: A Study on Palestinian Youth, Gaza Tracker, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4t3w2d9z>.

affected living conditions, particularly for young people, who are experiencing growing pressures that push them toward migration and individual escape as a solution, especially after the October 7 events. Economic hardships in Gaza have intensified since Hamas took control, as job opportunities have declined and economic projects have been largely reserved for members of the movement. Additionally, factional policies have marginalized those not affiliated with ruling parties, prompting young people to launch the “We Want to Live” movement in protest against deteriorating conditions and the lack of fair employment opportunities.³⁴

Youth in Gaza look to the Palestinian Authority’s efforts to secure Western support for reconstruction and stability, as well as to Palestinian business leaders to finance development projects that support youth initiatives. They also believe that civil society organizations can play a role in providing targeted programs for young people, enhancing their economic and social participation.

Recommendations

The Israeli war on Gaza following October 7 has profoundly impacted all segments of Palestinian society, particularly the youth, creating a state of confusion in their priorities and perspectives. This complex reality presents unprecedented challenges for future generations. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and strategic approach:

1. Rebuilding the National Project – Establishing a unified leadership that promotes a comprehensive national vision and ensures effective youth participation in decision-making processes.
2. Promoting Moderate Religious Thought – Developing a religious discourse that emphasizes human values and national identity, free from extremist political exploitation.
3. Improving Economic Conditions – Supporting entrepreneurial initiatives, encouraging local investment, and creating a legal and financial environment conducive to business development.

³⁴ Contribution from a participant in the discussion groups in Gaza when asked about the role of Palestinian political parties in the current political landscape

4. Enhancing Political Participation – Integrating youth into party policy-making, organizing transparent elections, and empowering them in decision-making roles.
5. Developing a National Media Strategy – Utilizing traditional media and social media platforms to strengthen national identity and counter extremism.
6. Launching Community Initiatives – Fostering citizenship by educating youth on pluralism, tolerance, and active political participation.
7. Establishing a National Youth Database – Monitoring the economic and social needs of youth to guide policymaking based on accurate scientific data.
8. Enhancing Transparency and Accountability – Strengthening youth involvement in oversight mechanisms and decision-making in political and economic institutions.
9. Strengthening West Bank–Gaza Youth Connections – Creating joint youth networks to facilitate idea exchange and collaborative development projects.
10. Reforming the Palestinian Political System – Forming an independent technocratic government under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that includes all Palestinian factions.

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