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# VOICES OF PALESTINIAN REFUGEE YOUTH ACROSS THE NEAR EAST: SOCIO-POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Francesca Albanese, Jalal Al Hussein

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النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية  
Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development

اللاجئين  
Refugees



## VOICES OF PALESTINIAN REFUGEE YOUTH ACROSS THE NEAR EAST: SOCIO-POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Francesca Albanese - Jalal Al Hussein



June  
2020



**ARDD**

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**Francesca Albanese**

**Jalal Al Hussein**

**June 2020**



*There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.'  
There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.*

*Arundhati Roy*

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## ACRONYMS

FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
LPDC	Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
oPt	Occupied Palestinian territory
PA	Palestinian Authority
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PRS	Palestinian Refugees from Syria
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The debate about the Palestinian refugees, their living conditions and possible future, continues to be sensitive. It is so both in the 'Near East', where the majority of Palestinian refugees still reside, and internationally, where issues pertaining to their past, present and future continue to be discussed at the United Nations and other forums. The study sheds new light on the Palestinian refugees, by focusing on a usually politically marginalized segment of their communities: refugee youth, whose perceptions and aspirations about their status within their communities and within host societies, as well as about their future, are important albeit often muted.

The study focuses on youth who are –or aim to be– politically and socially active, primarily from camps, in Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory, and Syria. By involving over one hundred young male and female Palestinians (most with current or past experience in social programmes or volunteer activities), the study tried to capture, through focus group discussions and eye-to-eye interviews, the voice of this youth on important issues. These included: their social and political status within their communities, the larger Palestinian 'polity' and the host society at large; the challenges and opportunities that shape their socio-political mobilization; their political consciousness as Palestinians and as young (camp) refugees; and how these factors intersect with and impact on their aspirations.

The new generation of refugees, based on the study, is an extraordinary repository of talents, human capital and hope who can make important contributions to their (Palestinian) communities and host societies alike. However, legal status issues, political fragmentation, dire economic conditions, and insufficient political support negatively affect their wellbeing and perception of themselves.

Youth's 'space for action' is severely restricted. Within the host societies, opportunities for political engagement, when they exist, are often precluded to Palestinians who are not nationals. Within the Palestinian community, restrictions affect first and foremost the Palestinian 'political body', where largely old-men dominated political parties and factions offer limited to no representation and mobilization to youth, particularly from refugee camps. This limitation gets magnified in the camps, where an overall patriarchal social system straightjackets youth participation in the bodies that rule over camp life (e.g. the camp committees).

Despite these limitations, youth see the potential of alternative means to "make their voice heard". Social media constitutes an important tool for youth to express their views about society, despite limitations imposed by governments and social media administrators alike. Experiences of volunteerism and youth empowerment in community-based organizations also represent an important alternative for involvement in community's affairs. Promoting effective social inclusion in host communities may help mitigate youth's perceptions of themselves as "outcasts," "unwanted/unwelcome foreigners" or simply as "belonging nowhere".



Youth's negative perceptions of themselves are at times connected to the way they feel about their Palestinian identity and the conflicting narratives that such identity may carry. 'Being Palestinian' for the youth represents resilience and steadfastness, a cause to defend and stand for. At the same time, youth suffer the way "they are seen" within host societies and at large, and they feel the stigma attached to it. They largely attribute it to the lack of awareness and critical discussion about the Palestinian refugee question, namely who they are and where they come from. Youth feel the urge to correct common stereotypes about them and experience their identity not only as "a wound to heal," but also as a solid base from which to step into the future.

When it comes to the future, this study identifies some trends among youth. On the one hand, there is an organic connection between individual aspirations and collective issues concerning the future of Palestine and the Palestinian (refugee) people at large. As with past generations, youth remain vocal advocates of the right of return, which they describe as existential, sacred and not renounceable. On the other hand, they believe that the quest for the right of return and the right to self-determination cannot be achieved at the expense of their human rights, namely other rights. They also believe that pending a settlement of the Palestinian refugee question, UNRWA's mandate should be preserved and its activities enhanced.

This study indicates that youth see no future in remaining marginalized, poor, disenfranchised, stateless and "deprived of the right to have rights" in their (host) societies. Pending their 'return' to Palestine, they ask for their overall empowerment: capacity building, good education, access to decent jobs and, last but not least, "political space". This empowerment is seen as critical to the realization of their own aspirations. However, these aspirations are expressed in different ways according to the reality in which they live: "living one's Palestinian-ness" while remaining "loyal to the state" in Jordan; getting "recognition" and "rights as human beings" in Lebanon and in the oPt; and "helping the [Palestinian] cause everywhere," including from the diaspora as the respondents from Syria said.

It remains unclear what opportunities young refugees can be offered in the current political context in Palestine and the region at large. Nonetheless, Palestinian refugee youth seem to have both the enthusiasm and the critical capacity to help revamp the Palestinian narrative and achieve historical justice through the realization of collective and individual human rights.

## INTRODUCTION

### Objectives and goal of the study

The main objective of this study is to take stock of the opinions of Palestinian refugee youth across the Near East. The focus is primarily youth's status within their community structures of influence and power. Of relevance here, is firstly the youth level of interest and participation in community initiatives as a tool for social and political mobilization. Such participation may take two forms: directly through involvement in the activities of local, national or international institutions; and an indirectly through the acquisition of educational, social and life skills likely to foster their ability to improve their lives and, thus, influence the community's overall development. Secondly, it is the way youth envisage their future based on their perceptions of the political and socioeconomic trends that affect their environment.

This study is articulated around the following interconnected set of key research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Palestinian refugee youth regarding the drivers of their participation in social and political activities at community, host country, and transnational Palestinian levels? Through which formal or informal channels do participation and or mobilization occur?
2. How do Palestinian refugee youth assess the opportunities that are offered to them by local, national and international stakeholders in order to promote their human development? In other words, what are the processes through which they believe they can realize their full potential as individuals and members of the community?
3. How do the Palestinian refugee youth perceive the organizations that claim to represent them, from the refugee committees in charge of the camps affairs to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)? Are they considered to offer effective opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making processes?
4. What do terms such as 'Palestine' and 'right of return' mean for the third and fourth generation of refugees? How are these concepts present in the youth's daily life and how do they affect their lives and aspirations? Do relevant stakeholders, including the Palestinian leadership, host country authorities and international actors, carry forward a discourse that is relevant to the youth and their aspirations?
5. How do the Palestinian refugee youth envisage their future in terms of status and living conditions? In the future, do they see themselves in: present host country, the future Palestinian state in the pre1967- borders (i.e. West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip), present-day Israel, or other countries (should they decide to migrate abroad)?

This study focuses on Palestinian refugee youth living in the area of the Near East where UNRWA operates: Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Syria<sup>1</sup>. They have different legal status and treatment, including opportunities for social and political participation (see Annex I)<sup>2</sup>. These range from citizenship and rights equal by law to those of the indigenous population in Jordan; treatment almost similar to those of the host Palestinian society in the oPt; treatment de facto equal to native nationals but without citizenship in pre-war Syria; and treatment as foreign residents deprived of numerous fundamental rights in Lebanon.

Despite such differences, all Palestinian refugees share key common characteristics. Those who have not acquired state citizenship (i.e. the majority of them in the Near East, except for most Palestinians in Jordan) remain stateless for the purpose of international law<sup>3</sup>. They also share significant characteristics, including a common Palestinian refugee identity and entitlements to have their situation “definitively settled” in accordance with relevant UN General Assembly resolutions<sup>4</sup>. Most refugees from 1948 including descendants are entitled to (voluntary) registration as ‘Palestine refugees’ with UNRWA under specific eligibility criteria<sup>5</sup>. The study first analyses the commonalities shared by refugee youth across borders and their impact on participation, before considering host country specificities.

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<sup>1</sup> Owing to the ongoing security situation in Syria, the research team was only able to reach out to a limited number of respondents. All of them currently live outside the country.

<sup>2</sup> Since their main displacements in the Near East in 1948 and 1967, Palestinians in the Near East have enjoyed varying status and treatment depending on a number of factors (time of arrival, political climate toward them, socio-economic status; family, political or religious affiliation; shifting attitudes toward the Palestinian leadership - see Annex I. For a comprehensive assessment of legal status(es) and treatment of Palestinian refugees (including 1967 displaced) across the dispersal, see Albanese, F. and Takkenberg, L., *Palestinian Refugees in International Law*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford University Press, May 2020.

<sup>3</sup> In the oPt, this is caused first and foremost by the ongoing Israeli occupation, which prevents the Palestinians from exercising self-determination ‘as a people’ and fully realizing the Palestinian statehood. Also, in order to protect Palestinians’ ‘nationality’ and their right of return, most Arab host countries, including Lebanon and Syria, have refused to grant them their citizenship (positive discrimination).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. UNGA Resolutions 194 of 302, 1948 of 2252, 1949 of 1967, and UNSC Resolution 237 of 1967. See also the Convention on the Status of Refugees, Article 1D and UNHCR, Guidelines on International Protection No. 13: Applicability of Article 1D of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees to Palestinian Refugees, December 2017, HCR/GIP/12/16, para. 9.

<sup>5</sup> UNRWA currently defines its “Palestine (registered) refugees as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.”; see <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>. The non-1948 refugees who were displaced to Jordan in 1967 (indigenous West Bankers and Gazans) were not registered with UNRWA although some of them have benefitted (and still benefit) from its services.

Because of their protracted situation, the Palestinian refugees and their cause have often been seen as an ‘unsolvable problem,’ which will continue to burden the host countries’ socio-economic and political stability. It remains to be seen how, against an adverse and volatile political context, diverging and common factors affect the situation of Palestinian refugees across and within the Arab host societies. Is the current time witnessing the emergence of a new generation of refugees that are likely to take the lead in reviving the Palestinians’ aspirations for self-determination at the individual and collective levels? Or is the current generation of refugees eager to engage in a broader ‘rights campaign’ that, without undermining the case for justice in and for Palestine, also demands ‘recognition of all rights’ in host countries in the region and abroad?

The political focus of the study notwithstanding, it is neither ideologically oriented nor attached to any particular political solution. Rather, the study aims to capture and give voice to the enormous potential carried by youth opinions, convictions and eagerness to be active actors in the making of their destiny and that of their community. Such potential has been overlooked so far, drastically limiting youth’s opportunity to influence discussions regarding their present or future. The study builds on refugee youth opinions about their current situation and aspirations and the role they could play in decision-making processes regarding issues of concern. Main issues range from the daily management of the refugee camps, for instance, to garnering solutions to the Palestinian refugee question, including the meaning of ‘return to Palestine,’ over seventy years after the 1948 exodus of the first generation of refugees. Such voices may provide innovative directions to the Palestinian national movement and its constitutive organizations, host countries and external stakeholders, including UNRWA and international cooperation agencies<sup>6</sup>.

### **Scope of the study: the respondents’ profile**

The study focuses on the socio-political participation of refugee youth, its modalities and goals. It mainly involves youth engaged in community activities (social, cultural, environmental, and capacity-building activities) either as participants in community-based organizations, or as autonomous initiators of such activities. Many of them are either high-school and university students or professionals with a relatively clear assessment of the present state of their community, its strengths and weaknesses, and how they would like to reform it. This sample of respondents is not representative of the entire Palestinian refugee youth population: it gives

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<sup>6</sup> The role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is also to be considered. UNRWA and UNHCR provide complementary protection for Palestinian refugees: UNRWA is responsible for them within its areas of operation while UNHCR is responsible when the refugees are outside UNRWA’s area of operation and in need for international protection (see n 4.above).

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voice to well-educated youth that have developed an articulate vision about the development of their community and of Palestine as a whole and are open to share it with the 'outside world'.

The study primarily—though not exclusively—considers youth residents in a specific geographical setting: the refugees living in any of the 58 camps scattered around the Near East or their adjoining neighbourhoods. Set up in the wake of the 1948 Arab–Israeli conflict as humanitarian spaces aimed to provide temporary housing and basic services to those Palestinian refugees who could not integrate the host countries' economic fabric, the refugee camps have become stable urban settings and also the symbol of Palestinian refugee resilience and resistance<sup>7</sup>. They are also spaces where refugee community activities can be easily identified in the form of camp committees (often referred to as 'Popular Committees' in the oPt and Lebanon and 'Camp Services Committees' in Jordan), welfare centres for youth, women and persons with disabilities and, except in Jordan, Palestinian factions. Therefore, although they only constitute less than one-third of the UNRWA-registered refugee population<sup>8</sup>, they remain, as pointed out by one author<sup>9</sup>, a key point of identity in the fragmented landscape of the Palestinian diaspora and, therefore, a privileged place for analysing the refugees' mobilization efforts.

One important note is that for Syria, the study could only reach a limited number of camp youth, who had been forced to leave the country between 2014 and 2016 fearing persecution. All of them had been politically active during the uprising. The information they provided has been used to understand structural political challenges/opportunities characterizing youth's socio-political participation, issues of identity, and aspirations for the future in Syria. However, it does not allow an assessment of the current socio-political situation for Palestinian refugee youth in Syria.

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<sup>7</sup> Peteet, J.M., *Landscape of hope and despair: Palestinian refugee camps*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2005.

<sup>8</sup> This is 28%, with significant regional differences, from a low of 17% in Jordan (412,000 persons) to a high of 51% in Lebanon (211,000 persons); see *UNRWA in Figures–2018-2019*, [https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa\\_in\\_figures\\_2019\\_eng\\_sep\\_2019\\_final.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa_in_figures_2019_eng_sep_2019_final.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Picaudou, N., *Le mouvement national palestinien: genèse et structure*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1989.

### **Relevance of the study (added value to existing literature)**

The study is not the first one pertaining to Palestinian refugee youth in the Near East. Previous studies – generally focusing on one specific host country – identified a number of key issues that this study investigates and builds on at regional level. For example, despite representing about one third of the population (UNFPA: 2017; IUED/UCL: 2005), refugee youth aged 16-30 years are considered disempowered, disenfranchised, and often disenfranchised within the(exiled) Palestinian community and host societies alike. Literature points to them as both the depository of hope toward the future and marginalized actors in decision-making agendas (Chatty: 2012, Salih: 2018). In certain countries, they suffer from limited social and professional integration (UNICEF: 2010; Sweidan: 2016), lack of or limited political space, and a social stigma from the host society, which camp realities further compound (Tienda & Wilson: 2002; Al-Masriet al.: 2014). This poses a real danger of creating ‘lost generations’ (Chatty 2002; NRC: 2016; Kuhnt et al.: 2017) with youth vulnerable to social violence or political radicalization (Allan et al.: 2005; Interpeace-Mustakbalna: 2017, Wagner, Glick et al: 2018) or left with no alternatives other than to leave Arab countries for good (NRC: 2016). All this despite their eagerness to play an active role in shaping their future, including in host societies (NRC: 2016 and OECD: 2016), and depart from the traditional ‘armed struggle’ paradigm of their fathers (Achilli: 2012; Sunaina: 2013).

Against this background, this study’s relevance lies firstly in its regional and transnational character. It endeavours to test ‘the regional validity’ of some of the host country (fields) based arguments made above, while identifying commonalities and differences among the refugee youth living in different host countries (and societies) under different legal and socio-economic statuses.

Also, this study goes beyond the issues generally covered, such as the youth psychosocial, education and employability, health, or security statuses. It tackles the little covered potential of the Palestinian refugee youth to participate in and influence existing forms of governance at local and national levels across national boundaries, and to reinterpret their collective rights in the light of the present. By doing so, the study sheds light to the unexplored interconnectedness between political structures, opportunities and identity both as Palestinian and as a member of the country where youth reside (as citizen and/or legal or temporary residents).



Through discussions around the aspirations for the future and possible scenarios, this study considers how youth see their opportunities 'as Palestinians', entitled to self-determination and 'as refugees', entitled to both the right to return as well as the right to build their present and future according to their human rights. This leads to also explore new emerging trends amongst youth regarding the linkages between various emigrations and the preservation of the refugees' inalienable rights.

By focusing on social and political agency, the study may inform strategies aimed at empowering Palestinian refugee youth as part of their community in exile and renew the Palestinian political discourse.

### **Structure of the study**

This report is composed of four sections designed to respond to the research issues highlighted above:

- o Section 1 presents the status of youth's community participation in the refugee camps and host societies in terms of opportunities, constraints and alternative ways of advocating rights and interests. Amongst the key issues here are the relationship between the Palestinian refugee youth and the local and international organizations operating in the camps in a political and/or humanitarian capacity and the latter's degree of inclusiveness vis-à-vis youth involvement in decision-making processes.
- o Section 2 tackles the notion of Palestinian identity and the meaning of 'being Palestinian' for third or fourth generation Palestinian refugees, 'suspended' between the 1948 Nakba, which still defines them, and the future, which seems to offer limited opportunities. It briefly delves into how some of the issues discussed in section 1 may impact youth's perceptions of the self, within different contexts and communities.
- o Section 3 considers refugee youth aspirations for their future based on several factors, including their hopes to return to their homeland and for better living conditions in either their host country or abroad. Such aspirations are analysed through the prism of the refugees' traditional claims for the recognition and implementation of their 'right of return to Palestine' and their representation of what 'Palestine' means for them today.
- o Section 4, based on the above, offers recommendations for the main local and international stakeholders and advocates of Palestinians' rights to better accompany the Palestinian refugee youth's human development by helping them create space and opportunities to influence their fate as individuals as well as part of their community and, beyond, that of their people at large.

## Methodology

The study was conducted between November 2019 and February 2020, including fieldwork in Jordan, Lebanon and the West Bank, and Skype calls with refugees from Gaza and Syria. In order to analyse Palestinian refugee youth's engagement in their community and more largely that of the Palestinian refugees across the Near East, the study used various data collection tools: desk review, focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews. FGDs and interviews allowed for outreach to 102 youth.

### *Desk review*

The desk review included primarily available literature produced by academics (see above), as well as studies by governmental and international organizations about the Palestinian refugee youth situation. It also considered literature related to initiatives conducted by international and local institutions in order to enhance these youth's living conditions and livelihoods.

### *Focus-Group Discussions (FGDs)*

The study conducted 16 FGDs, totalling 91 youth in groups of 5 to 12 participants (16-32 years old) of both genders<sup>10</sup>, mainly – but not exclusively – within camp communities. Occasionally, older refugee participants who could provide useful historical background of the youth narrative were allowed to join. Respondents were mostly youth engaged in their social activities, or otherwise politically active, who had been identified by non-profit institutions working in the field of human rights and or socio-political empowerment at the behest of ARDD, its partners as well as the research team. FGDs were conducted as follows:

- o Four in Jordan (Amman with West Bankers and with ex-Gazans; Baqaa Camp; Zarqa camp; and inhabitants of the Jerash “Gaza” camp)<sup>11</sup>
- o Five in the West Bank (Balata camp, Qalandia camp, Arroub camp, Al-Fawwar camp, and a Bedouin settlement near Bethlehem);
- o Three in Lebanon. Owing to the volatile political situation at the time of this fieldwork (December 2019) and the need for security clearance for camps in the north and south of the country, all three focus groups took place in the Beirut area: in Beirut city and in the Shatila and the Bourj el-Brajneh camps;

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<sup>10</sup> Except in Bourj al-Brajneh (Lebanon) and Zarqa (Jordan) camps, where only males participated.

<sup>11</sup> Persons who were displaced from the Gaza Strip to Jordan in 1967 and have lived in Jordan ever since (including their descendants) are commonly referred as ‘ex-Gazans’ (see below Section 1.1).

- o Four were carried out through Skype with Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip from Beit Lahya, Khan Younis camp, Nuseirat camp, Rafah camp, Jabalia camp, Khan Younis camp, Burej camp and Deir al-Balah camp. These FGDs also included refugees living outside camps, e.g. in Gaza City.

Due to the difficult situation prevailing in Syria, no FGDs could be organized in the country. Instead, relevant information was collected through semi-structured interviews with Palestinians from Syria (see below).

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews with eleven key youth particularly active in the socio-political arena, including as social/political 'entrepreneurs', were held in order to complete the information collected during the FGDs. This includes four interviews in Jordan, two in Lebanon and five from Syria (two refugees currently living in the Netherlands, one in Germany, one in the USA and one in Canada).

### **1. Community participation for Palestinian refugee youth: surviving on the margin**

#### Main findings:

- (1) Youth operate within an undetermined/restricted 'political space' in camps and host societies at large
- (2) Youth feel 'pushed' to mobilize and engage politically and or socially, often as a reaction to marginalization, discrimination and the denial of rights
- (3) Social media are considered efficient tools of social participation despite the censorship and control exerted by the administrators of social media outlets (Facebook for instance) and the host authorities
- (4) Youth empowerment activities and 'volunteer' experiences in community-based organizations provide important (and alternative) ways of participating in the community affairs, despite the limitations of these initiatives

### *Overview of the social and political structure of the Palestinian refugee camps*

Since their initial establishment, the Palestinian refugee camps have undergone significant changes. Tents have been gradually replaced by mud, brick, zinc and, later, concrete shelters, with most camps being gradually integrated in the neighbouring towns' urban structure, and several of them even becoming significant commercial hubs (e.g. the Wihdat camp in South Amman). Yet, the shelters have nevertheless kept their initial label as 'shelter' (*ma'wa, malja'*) and were not called 'homes' (*bayt, dar*), so as to underscore their temporary nature, pending the return of the refugees to their (ancestors') homes. In the same vein, the camps are still named *moukhayyam* (i.e. tent camp)<sup>12</sup>. Since the 2000s, most of them, especially in Jordan and the West Bank, have undergone key infrastructural improvements in terms of water supply, sewerage and drainage systems, roads and footpaths, street lighting and retaining walls. Yet, limitations on their urban management (e.g. limitations on the extensions of the shelters), high poverty rates and related social ills, uncontrolled political militancy and violence (especially in Lebanon), all continue to give camp communities as an ambivalent status as both marginalized 'poverty pockets' and symbols of the Palestinians' resistance to assimilation pending the implementation of the right of return<sup>13</sup>.

The specific significance of the camps in both the Palestinian refugee experience and vis-à-vis the host country has contributed to ascribing a political dimension to any activity undertaken in the camp, from physical infrastructure upgrading<sup>14</sup>, to any kind of social and cultural activities. In this respect, the large number of community-based organizations operating in the camps often strikes visitors. These include:

- o Camp Popular/Service Committees: tasked to conduct and/or oversee the implementation of community projects in the camps, they are also in charge of presenting refugees' claims to key state and international stakeholders such as UNRWA and other international development and humanitarian

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<sup>12</sup> Al Hussein, J. (2011), *The management of the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan: between logics of integration and exclusion*, Beirut, Presses de l'Ifpo.

<sup>13</sup> For a recent overview of the situation in the Palestinian refugee camps, see: ANERA What Are Palestinian Refugee Camp Conditions Like?, September 5, 2019, <https://www.anera.org/blog/what-are-palestinian-refugee-camp-conditions-like/> and Siklawi, R., "The Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon Post 1990: Dilemmas of Survival and Return to Palestine", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter 2019), pp. 78-94.

<sup>14</sup> As the former Head of the Housing and Urban Development Cooperation (HUDC) in charge of a programme aimed at rehabilitating the poorest regions' housing and physical infrastructure in Jordan in the early 2000s put it: "outside camps, even within entirely Palestinian refugee communities, you have a large range of options: upgrading, demolition of dilapidated buildings, reconfiguration of the neighbourhood, etc. In the camps, you can only upgrade: every stone is 'sacred'," interview, Amman, 3 January 2020.

tarian agencies. Elected by members of the community (West Bank and the Gaza Strip), appointed by the government (Jordan) or by political factions inside camps (Lebanon), they are generally viewed as the local representatives of the camp refugee community, and the entry point for any intervention.

- o The welfare community-based organizations that were created as of the early 1950s by UNRWA in order to enhance the self-sufficiency of economically inactive refugees (and from the 1960s, people with disabilities) through the provision of recreational activities, craftwork, and 'self-help' community works in the camp<sup>15</sup>. While the Youth Activity Centers (also known as 'Youth Clubs') provided recreational and sports activities mainly to male youth, the Women Activity Centers promoted sewing, embroidery and cooking activities to female youth that also generated income. The activities of these centres, now mostly autonomous from UNRWA<sup>16</sup>, have evolved in accordance with the needs of the community, now also providing, for the Women Programme Centres for instance, health education, legal literacy, IT learning, life skills, fitness and income-generating projects. While their beneficiaries are camp refugees, they are today also open to non-camp inhabitants.
- o Community-based organizations, in general set up by camp notables or local 'social/political entrepreneurs.' A majority of them attempts to fill gaps in the provision of medical or social services by UNRWA or governmental institutions or to provide recreational activities. Few have the technical skills to provide capacity-building services to the camp youth and, according to veteran social entrepreneurs, it has become difficult to mobilize youth for large-scale volunteering campaigns (streets cleaning for instance) since the 1990s, when the economic situation deteriorated sharply in the region and appeals to civic values lost traction.
- o Local or international civil society organizations set up to provide various forms of support to the refugee community, both in the areas of the above-mentioned social services, but increasingly in areas of human rights, advocacy and psychosocial support (e.g. Aidoun, ANEERA, BADIL, Norwegian Refugee Council, Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, We Are Not Numbers [in the Gaza Strip]).
- o A number of partners, have played an important role in the field of capacity-building for the camp youth in Jordan, the West Bank and Lebanon since 2014.

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<sup>15</sup> Annual report of the Director of UNRWA (1952-1953), A/2470 et add.1, par.183; and Annual report of the Director of UNRWA (1951-1952), A/2171 et add.1, par.23.

<sup>16</sup> UNRWA gradually disengaged from the Youth Centers activities following their increasing political activism that was seen to endanger the Agency's neutrality: first in Jordan (in the 1970s) then in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (during the Second Intifada in the early 2000s).

What follows is an analytical overview of the constraints and opportunities that affect youth community's participation in the refugee camps and host societies across the Near East.

While some of the factors outlined below relate specifically to the situation in refugee camps (e.g. social and political marginalization), others are shared by large segments of the host country populations (e.g. patriarchy). Several respondents stated that the issues they face are not always different from issues challenging local indigenous communities. However, the lack of alternatives available in camps, as well as reduced access to host society institutions and opportunities resulting from legal constraints and/or the social stigma carried by camp refugee dwellers in particular, tend to compound the plight of the camp youth.

## **1.2 A plurality of constraints on social mobilization at both the host country and camp level**

When asked about the opportunities available to youth to participate in the affairs of their community, female and male youth across the countries under survey almost always started by highlighting obstacles that constrain their social and political participation. These obstacles are many, of different nature, and often apply simultaneously. They originate from both outside and inside the camp, including:

- o Host state authorities and society (external constraints)
- o The social and political structure of the camp community (internal constraints)

The remainder of this section analyses both.

### **1.2.1 The host state and society: youth participation and mobilization outside camps**

Despite their different legal statuses in the fields covered by this study<sup>17</sup>, most respondents consider themselves politically marginalized, having the feeling of being treated more or less as unwanted or unwelcome foreigners in the countries where they live. The political space available to them is described as "*non-existent*," "*non-visible*" or "*of no use*" by most respondents. This is especially the case in Lebanon, where the Palestinians as a whole are not only deprived of citizenship and correlated rights (rights to vote and to work in the public sector and in many jobs of the private sector), but also have to "*bear the blame of having destabilized the country*" during the years of civil war and beyond, according to a respondent. Today this leads Palestinian refugees to carefully avoid participating in any event directly

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<sup>17</sup> See Introduction above.



related to their living conditions. For example, while they support the current Lebanese protests/‘revolution’ for improved political and socio-economic governance of the country<sup>18</sup>, they categorically refuse to join the movement out of fear of backlash: *“It would be so easy for the state authorities to hold us responsible for any problem arising from the demonstrations,”* one respondent said. Because the camps are under the control of the Palestinian factions of all affiliations, their inhabitants tend to be under tighter Lebanese authorities’ scrutiny<sup>19</sup>. Respondents from south-Lebanon camps emphasized the impact governmental ‘control’ policies, allegedly aimed at improving security conditions inside and outside the camps, had on their lives. These policies include the imposition of ‘permits’ to enter refugee camps and of *“check points and block of cements”* at their entrance<sup>20</sup>. Respondents said that such measures effectively *“imprison”* the refugees in closed camps submitted to a ‘state of exception’ rule, thus isolating them even more from the host society<sup>21</sup>. This, as a respondent put it, *“is bad for both communities.”*

Another case where frustration was raised during FGDs is that of the Palestinians who were displaced from the Gaza Strip to Jordan in the wake of the 1967 war (‘ex-Gazans’), who were never naturalized. Respondents lamented that more than forty years after their arrival in Jordan, they are still considered as foreigners, constrained in many aspects of their daily lives, including the renewal of their identification documents, and access to work, ownership and higher education<sup>22</sup>. In the Jerash (or ‘Gaza’) refugee camp -predominantly inhabited by ex-Gazans- this constraint extends to their freedom to launch autonomous social or cultural initiatives.

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<sup>18</sup> This refers to the demonstrations that Lebanese started in the fall of 2019 to express their discontent towards the political and economic status quo in the country.

<sup>19</sup> The “Cairo Agreement” that was signed between PLO and a Lebanese delegation in November 1969 established the right of the Palestinian residents of Lebanon to join the Palestinian revolution through armed struggle and allowed the Palestinians to control refugee camps in Lebanon and launch attacks against Israel from south Lebanon. It also guaranteed their right to work, to residence and to movement. Although it was abrogated in 1987, the Palestinian factions maintain control over the camps.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, the Ein el-Hilwe camp in Saida today is encircled by a concrete wall and watch towers.

<sup>21</sup> The expression is used by Hanafi, Sari, “Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 23, Issue 2, June 2010, p.134-159.

<sup>22</sup> They were not granted citizenship but permanent residence until their situation is durably settled and a two-year-passport to allow them to travel and as a proof of identity only (information based on conversation with veteran ‘social entrepreneurs’ in February 2020).

Host society discrimination vis-à-vis Palestinian refugees may be considered less significant elsewhere. In Jordan, Palestinian refugees were from the outset (1948-1954) granted the same legal status as the host population. In pre-war Syria Palestinians were de facto integrated in the country's socioeconomic sphere. In the oPt the life of all residents (including non-refugees) is affected by the Israeli occupation, even though camp residents may suffer more from incursions by the Israeli army as camps tend to be seen as 'hotbed of resistance'<sup>23</sup>. However, most camp youth respondents said to feel *"far from being full members of their host society."* In the West Bank, respondents noted that the camps' reputation of being sanctuaries of *"uncontrolled armed factions"* (more especially the Balata camp in the Nablus governorate) has made them obvious targets for both Israeli army and the Palestinian Authority (PA) security services. Across the oPt, participation in host society itself remains somewhat constrained by a 'class discrimination' that, while not always visible, has traditionally kept landless camp refugees *"in the margins,"* as FGDs in the West Bank revealed. The lower status is expressed in the choice of a spouse: in the West Bank, for instance, indigenous Palestinians from Hebron and Nablus *"would never give their daughter to a camp refugee,"* as stated by female camp refugees. The same discrimination is also apparent in commercial transactions, as revealed by a respondent from Al Fawwar camp (near Hebron). Discrimination has also traditionally existed in the Gaza Strip, although to a lesser extent given the fact that the refugees constitute the overwhelming majority (about seventy per cent) of the population.

Most respondents said that they had no political affiliation or activity, largely because they view *"all parties and factions [as] corrupt and focused on self-interest"*. While a few, primarily in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, admitted to having affiliations with political groups, the majority firmly refuses to join existing parties. It was generally reported that neither Hamas nor Fatah support youth's political participation fearing that it may turn into criticism or opposition. In the words of a male respondent in the Gaza Strip, *"political participation is limited by both [Palestinian authorities] and the occupation. It is a fast-track to get arrested."* This sentiment is shared by respondents in the West Bank, who often refer to *"multiple layers of oppression"* around them (not limited to refugees), where on top of the Israeli occupation, the PA is often perceived as part of the unjust system created in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords. *"This is why I am against politicization of the [Palestinian] cause"* one respondent added. In Gaza the situation remains particularly dire as a result of the now twelve-year long blockade imposed by Israel, aggravated by the continuous internecine divide between Hamas and Fatah. The dramatic deterioration of the economic situation that has ensued the blockade, and the imposition of an authoritarian regime by the de facto authority (Hamas), seem to

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<sup>23</sup> Refugee camps have often been the direct target of attacks and regular military operations, during which Palestinian refugee youth have been particularly at risk. In 2017, UNRWA documented two Israeli army incursions per day in refugee camps across the West Bank, which often resulted in fatalities, live ammunition injuries, excessive use of tear gas, property damage, and severe societal stress. Cit. in Albanese & Takkenberg, 2020.

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have –in the words of a young social entrepreneur– *“eradicated any opportunity for local youth’s autonomous/non-political community initiatives.”* The only available initiatives are supported by international stakeholders.

As a result, a widespread feeling among youth is that *“no one really politically represents the Palestinian refugees”* in host country or regional arenas.

### 1.2.2. The social and political structure of the camp communities: an opportunity turned into constraint

Internal constraints on youth community participation appear in the respondents’ narratives as no less significant than external, host society/state, constraints. While the discussions initially tackled the limited capacities of most community-based organizations (mostly poorly-funded and understaffed charities providing basic services), the main issue seemed to reside more in deep-seated values and related modes of governance that influenced social and political dynamics within refugee camp communities.

The first of these constraining values is patriarchy, whereas older men (above 40 or 50 years of age) tightly hold moral authority and dominate all influential positions. In fact, respondents indicated that while discrimination and marginalization of the Palestinians may play a big role in host societies, *“patriarchy is widespread in Arab societies”* and is a significant inhibitor of youth mobilization and socio-political participation in particular, regardless of legal status or socioeconomic background. In the words of a young refugee:

*“In Arab countries in general, politics [are] determined and controlled by older people, men in almost the totality of cases, who do not value and respect youth: and it is hard for them to listen.”* [Female respondent from Balata Camp, West Bank]

Respondents acknowledged that the impact of patriarchy is magnified in the Palestinian camps, where refugees have reproduced and preserved the (clan and tribal) structures that were in place at the time of the original displacement in 1948. In the West Bank, respondents dramatically referred to the adverse impact of patriarchy as *“no less harmful than the [Israeli] occupation,”* ultimately overshadowing their potential in many aspects of societal life. As a female West Banker respondent put it: *“Patriarchy dominates my private life, as much as the occupation dominates the rest.”* This perception was shared by respondents in or from other host countries.

Youth resent this type of dominance, in particular in regard to membership of the camp committees, which tend to exclude women and young men from decision-making positions. The problem across all host countries, as respondents put it, *“is not that being a committee member requires particular competence or experience”* (e.g. leadership or management) but that it operates at the expense of the younger members of the community. *“We are not informed, we are not consulted,”* respondents unanimously said, lamenting that camp committees take decisions

about programs and camp interventions based on their own views of 'what makes sense' at best, or simply what is in their personal interest, whatever the mode of selection of its members is<sup>24</sup>. In the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank, respondents further complained that no committee elections had taken place in the past 16 years. Against this background, the nomination by the political factions of a less than 30 years old man to head the Popular Committee of the Mieh-Mieh camp (south of Lebanon) is a notable exception.

In Lebanon and in the oPt, affiliation with Palestinian factions is often a precondition to be elected as a member of the camp committees. In this respect, most of the respondents complained that this was another exclusionary factor, since they had no such political affiliation or activity. Many young educated Palestinians also resent the lack of merit-based political representation of the camp committees, seeing them as embroiled in internecine fighting and with no vision of their future and that of their community. *"They fight just for the sake of fighting: this is what we must avoid doing; our struggle for the realization of our rights must be tailored both to our values, clearly established goals and to the means we have,"* as a Gazan youth put it, echoing statements also made by respondents in the West Bank and Lebanon. Those few respondents who said to be formally affiliated to some political groups, admitted that this was their coping strategy to secure some forms of protection in the insecure context of the camps.

Political affiliations, sometimes compounded by tribal and clan affiliations, may also determine, including in Jordan, participation in community-based organizations and eligibility for their basic education or relief services. As a male youth from the Baqaa camp (north of Amman, Jordan) explained:

*"The Committees and community-organizations in the camp talk but do little: organized volunteering initiatives are rare. They also exclude young people who do not belong to a party or a group, work for their own benefit and the benefits of their followers, and they antagonize the successful people in the camp."<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, a general assembly composed of 40-100 amongst the main notables of the camp elect the 15 members of the Camp Popular Committees. In Lebanon, the membership of the Popular Committees is selected by the political factions dominating the camp. In Jordan, the members of the Camp Services Committee are appointed by the Department of Palestinian Affairs, the governmental body in charge of camp refugee affairs. However, as a result of pressures of the camp communities and foreign donor agencies, members of the Committees were replaced by younger professionals and became members of less effective 'Consultative Committees.'

<sup>25</sup> This statement echoes the assessment made by a former UNRWA employee in charge of developmental projects in the Talbieh camp based on participatory process including working groups (WG) formed by the camp's women and youth. Ultimately, the WG's youth and women members were gradually ousted, to be replaced by male camp notables. More depressing yet, several of the WG's early achievements had been vandalized or been neglected. This confirmed, according to her, how difficult it is to lead a democratic process "in an environment that practice anti-democracy in their everyday life." See Al-Nammari, F., "Participatory urban upgrading and power: Lessons learnt from a pilot project", *Habitat International*, 39 (2013), 224-231; and Al-Nammari, F., "Talbiyeh camp improvement project and the challenges of community participation", Research paper, 2010, [https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/public\\_policy/pal\\_camps/pc\\_events/Documents/20101008ifi\\_unrwa60\\_conference/conference\\_papers/day2/ifi\\_unrwa\\_conf\\_day2panel2\\_paper2\\_nammari.pdf](https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/public_policy/pal_camps/pc_events/Documents/20101008ifi_unrwa60_conference/conference_papers/day2/ifi_unrwa_conf_day2panel2_paper2_nammari.pdf)

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### 1.3 Opportunities for social mobilization

Respondents concurred that few options exist to develop their human capacities, to be well-informed, and to engage directly in the affairs of their community through traditional means of participation. Against a generally adverse participatory background, respondents identified media and participatory social projects as alternative tools for social and, to a lesser extent, political mobilization, even though they are subject to limitations as well. The question remains as to whether these alternative tools are sufficient and well-tailored to the needs of the youth willing to play a role in the community.

#### 1.3.1 Social media as an informational, networking tool

The main alternative participation option mentioned by the respondents is social media. The use of social media is indeed widespread among Palestinian youth, including amongst camp residents. Each camp has one or more Facebook page, even though they are mainly used to convey information of general interest. However, being informed about the camp's daily matters is important for segments of the population that have little or no access to decision-making circles.

Social media is also recognized to have played a role as key capacity building tool at the hands of some community-based organizations, as stated by a social entrepreneur:

*"We try on social media to create a space for youth to share from a youth perspective on all kinds of aspects of life. Trying to do something for the homeland, also trying to shed light on some other (social) issues, for example unemployment and to brainstorm on ideas about how to generate income" [Male respondent, Balata camp, West Bank]*

Politically, respondents noted that social media has been instrumental in organizing gatherings, and even protests. The Great March of Return in the Gaza Strip of 2018-2019, for instance, is said to have been largely organized via social media. During the first stages of the Syria crisis in 2011-2012, social media was used to spread the message that Palestinians should avoid being embroiled in the crisis and later, to mobilize for the protection of the humanitarian space in the camps. Individually, social media is mainly used to read news and exchange information with peers, to connect with members of the family across the Near East (for instance between ex-Gazans residing in Jordan and their relatives still in the Gaza Strip, or those in Lebanon and their family in the northern part of Israel), or in the diaspora, virtually connecting dispersed Palestinian communities around the world. This capacity to connect people plays a strategic and symbolic function at a time when the unity of the Palestinian national movement is experiencing fragmentation at different levels: political (the Hamas/Fatah divide compounded by the fading role of the PLO as the unifying entity among the various segments of the Palestinian people) and demographic (the forced displacements since the 2000s of Palestinians from Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Syria).



These constraints do not mean that the limitations of youth's freedom of expression relax in the virtual space. Quite to the contrary, as social media is carefully watched by various authorities: the platform itself (Facebook, for instance) and the host authorities, and Israel in the oPt. Freedom of expression is authorized insofar as it does not affect these authorities' interests. While Facebook algorithms detect any Palestine/Israel related statement as hate speech, Arab states, apart from Lebanon – *"where no one checks what Palestinians write and post on Facebook"* as one respondent said – have adopted cybercrime laws that, by criminalizing political posts considered offensive to the country's integrity, can lead to forms of personal persecution, including arrests. In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the threat is double edged and may come from Israeli authorities, as well as the PA or Hamas, respectively, as a respondent highlighted:

*"People active on social media get harassed and even arrested. Facebook users choose words carefully. 'Jews' and 'Jewish' in our posts give the alarm. And if it is not the Israelis, it is the PA that may knock on your door."* [Female respondent, Al-Fawaar camp, West Bank]

Ultimately, however, the respondents' assessment of the social media in all fields remained positive: social media provides youth with a space of freedom and helps them be active in their community.

### 1.3.2 Social engagement: an old commitment that gets renewed in the camps

Most respondents agreed that they remain attached to the notion of self-realization through mutual help and volunteerism. However, they acknowledged that what primarily triggered most of their peers' concerns and resulting social actions was the realization of their individual relief, educational and livelihood needs. Being educated and/or having benefitted from psychosocial and capacity building programmes, they could also enjoy higher-valued needs pertaining to their development as active members of their community:

*"Helping underprivileged camp residents improve their situation, helps [me] feel part of a larger society and have hope and horizon."* [Female respondent, Baqaa camp, Jordan]

At a more individual level, engagement in social activities and capacity-building programmes enables youth to develop self-confidence, awareness of their identity, and avoid *"boredom, idleness, and [the] culture of dependency"* that affect so many of their peers. It also enables youth to build lasting friendship ties with other persons involved in social participation programmes, which plays an important social function especially in the precarious, volatile reality that many Palestinian youth experience, from the oPt to Lebanon. In the long run, such activities may therefore contribute to the emergence of a new leadership likely to positively impact on their community.



As stated earlier, there are few camp refugee institutions able to provide such services. Those who do are generally financially supported by international/bilateral cooperation agencies, usually on a short-term or project basis. The growing presence of humanitarian actors in and around refugee camps has resulted in 'professionalization' of what was traditionally provided through charitable activities and individuals. This creates some discomfort among a number of respondents, who see Palestinians, and particularly the youth growing up in this new environment, *"more dependent on foreign aid than attached to their own [Palestinian] cause."*

Several respondents also raised doubts about the ultimate goals of foreign interventions, particularly in the oPt: could they also be a form of (political) *"corruption of Palestinian youth"* aimed at accepting the normalization of their current status? While refugees who have benefitted from (or are at present part of) these social programmes are generally positive, others express their scepticism toward *"NGOs coming to support [Palestinians] in the name of humanitarian action."*

*"Most of those who work in camps...reflect their [own] state's politics and policies toward Palestine and the refugees. Many of them support Israel and as such they do not work with anyone supporting Hamas or BDS."* [Female respondent, Shatila camp, Lebanon]

Resented among some respondents is also that *"Western organizations have their own ethical and political views"* and it is rare that people working for them fully understand and care for *"their [Palestinian] cause."* This is all the more true in the eyes of the respondents when core-contents of development and or humanitarian activities in camps are decided *"in the capitals"* circumscribing or just ignoring priorities that have been identified by youth in the field.

*"[For them] we are rather a business cycle, part of the economy."* [Male respondent, Balata camp, West Bank]

Such feelings tend to be reinforced by the humanitarian principle of 'neutrality' which guide international humanitarian organizations operating in the camps. During discussions, UNRWA's neutrality policy—which requires the Agency to ban any display of biased sign of militancy in its installations, including anti-Israeli slogans and pre-1948 Palestine maps—often came under attack<sup>26</sup>. In fact, camp youth see that many Western donors promote such an approach. Both in the West Bank and in Lebanon, respondents referred to incidents where donors *"had got upset"* because of Palestinians displaying signs of their national identity during public events:

*"One day we were singing a song about Palestine and Israel and the Palestinians working with [a UN organization] told them that 'this song should not be sung again'. But how can one mention Palestine without mentioning Israel?"* [Female respondent from Qalandia camp, West Bank]

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<sup>26</sup> On UNRWA neutrality, see 'UNRWA and neutrality', available at: [www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa\\_neutrality\\_factsheet\\_2018\\_final\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa_neutrality_factsheet_2018_final_eng.pdf)

Whereas capacity-building and psycho-social support programmes are considered positive at both individual and collective levels, they are also seen as *“only curing the symptoms without addressing the main problem”*. For the respondents, ‘the main problem’ is the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and its continuous denial of the rights of the Palestinians, including having a state of their own. Ending the occupation and land-grabbing in the West Bank and lifting the blockade in the Gaza Strip, respondents unanimously agree, *“should be the priority of any (humanitarian) intervention.”*

## 2. The meaning of ‘being Palestinian’ for the youth

### Main findings:

- (1) Youth’s identity remains firmly ‘Palestinian’ ,including among those who have acquired citizenship elsewhere (in that case, but also where they have de facto integrated, youth feel ‘double ties’ both to ‘Palestine’ and the host society)
- (2) The perception of the self or their community as “unwanted/unwelcome foreigners” or “outcasts” conflicts with and often overshadows the pride of being Palestinians. This triggers confusion and hopelessness among youth and may push them to want to flee the host society, at any cost
- (3) Young generations embrace a concept of ‘liberation of the Palestinian people’ as realization of all their rights, wherever they are, as part of their struggle for the Palestinian cause

### 2.1 Being Palestinian between past and present realities: Splintering of Identity?

To what extent has the protracted nature of exile, with its multitude of political, social and economic constraints, affected the Palestinian refugee youth’s sense of ‘being a Palestinian’? Respondents unanimously indicated that the question of Palestinian identity, of *“who I am as a Palestinian”* and what it means being a Palestinian ‘refugee,’ is deeply felt among the youth, be they camp refugees or not. For many, it is often a double-edge sword: a precious legacy to hang on to, but also a heavy one to carry outside Palestine. Respondents felt that Arab host countries at large have long ceased to consider Palestinians as ‘brothers’ and welcome them in their societies. While profoundly feeling to *“belong to pre-1948 [historical] Palestine”* – a place they never resided in, yet cherish through thoughts and memories cultivated through family love and attachment – Palestinian refugee youth are also practically rooted elsewhere, in places where they often feel unwelcome (Lebanon), no longer welcome (Syria), or welcome with some qualifications (Jordan). In the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, ‘Palestine’ refers both to the places of origin lost in 1948 ([their] Palestine’ when they discuss the right of

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return) and 'the Palestine of refuge' that may once become the Palestinian state, where any future prospect is conditioned by the plans of Israel's military and the settler colonial regime. The interactions between these multiple dimensions of the Palestinian identity often trigger feelings of confusion and hopelessness among youth.

Yet, the notion of 'Palestinian identity' remains a strong federating element. The refugees carry it with what they call "*pride and honour*," as it relates both to cherished traditions of the past and to a political conscience anchored in the claim for the realization of individual and collective rights, regardless of the political and technical challenges this may entail. "*Palestine is my identity*," "*my history*," "*where I come from*," "*where I belong*" and "*want to return to*" was a common refrain. Youth embrace this identity, including those who are born of mixed marriages (e.g. with one Lebanese or Syrian parent) and may have acquired the host country nationality (e.g. Lebanese or Syrian through male line). "*Palestine is like a tattoo on my arm*," a female respondent from Lebanon said.

At the same time, youth also see their Palestinian identity and refugee status being at the origin and centre of the hardship they experience in the Middle East and often beyond: a precarious legal status (unless they have citizenship, as do most persons of Palestinian descent in Jordan), their differential and unfavourable socio-economic treatment; and a reason for general stigma, misperception and stereotyping. A clear sense of distinctiveness, which in some cases becomes an internalized sense of discrimination, has therefore also become a defining element of Palestinian identity. This has regional nuances: more pronounced in Lebanon; less relevant in the oPt; and generally obscured and muted in Jordan (where there is officially no recognized nationality other than Jordanian). For Palestinians in Syria where – prior to the war – being Palestinian was a fact of life not necessarily lived as distinctiveness, the war has been "*an identity awakening*" which, as all respondents from Syria recount, made them become "*more Palestinian*" and feel somewhat less integrated in the host society. After being targeted by both government forces and militias to join the armed struggle, their Palestinian identity awakening passed through various forms of discrimination: at the border and within neighbouring countries – where they were treated differently and often worse than Syrian asylum seekers – and beyond, but also as they searched for safe haven in Europe or North America.

*"Sooner or later, something in life – a border, the lack of right documentation – will remind you what it means being a Palestinian refugee."* [Male respondent from Syria, currently in Canada]

For many, such distinctiveness equates to "*being a perpetual foreigner*" and "*belonging nowhere*." This impacts youth in different ways, creating fears, aggravating the sense of precariousness and inhibiting social participation. Even those who enjoy citizenship reported "*fear to speak out*" and general tendency to "*accept the status quo*" whenever they experience forms of discrimination. Some respondents warned that legitimate fears may also generate a 'sense of victimization' among Palestinians, whereby it is easier to "*blame others and complain*," rather than to

realistically assess how to contribute to change *"the misery in which [many] Palestinians live."* Respondents criticized this attitude, which elsewhere has been defined *"the politics of suffering"*<sup>27</sup>.

Some youth in the community, the respondents stated, may succumb to the frustration generated by lack of opportunities. Drugs, crimes and violence are said to be spreading in camps. The socio-economic and psychosocial degradation felt in the camps is real and a consequence of the feelings of hopelessness and abandonment to which refugees can succumb. *"Palestinians grow up being associated with negative images,"* said a young refugee, claiming that at a certain point, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: *"no job, no future, nothing to lose."*

Youth see the discrimination toward the Palestinians evidenced in multiple subtle ways, and they also attribute the stereotypes with which they are saddled to the limited opportunities to openly *"discuss the Palestinian presence and role in host countries."* Respondents recognize that the PLO and its strategies *"may have made enemies"* in the Arab world, thus stifling more support for the Palestinian cause. They also realize that in the past Palestinians *"lacked awareness"* of the consequence of their struggle in host societies. This may have contributed to their negative image. Through this self-criticism youth are, perhaps without fully realizing it, contributing to give new meaning to 'being Palestinian,' embracing a different concept of 'resistance:' youth speak of *"fighting for justice"* and the realization of Palestinian rights through *"empowerment,"* for themselves and their community alike. *"Resistance cannot just mean being ready to die,"* said a young respondent from Jordan. From the Gaza Strip to Syria, Lebanon to the West Bank and Jordan, education and social inclusion are seen as two fundamental ways to contribute to the Palestinian cause.

The respondents accept that *"being Palestinian is political in itself"* and that embracing such an identity *"carries a message."* Yet, they reject the 'positive discrimination' argument prevalent among host authorities, entailing that deprivations are necessary to maintain the visibility of the refugee issue.

*"I am tired of being used as a political tool, ignored, marginalized, rejected for reasons that have nothing to do with who I am, oppressed while the world is looking at me as if they cannot visualize what a Palestinian refugee is..."* [Male respondent, Khan Yunis camp, the Gaza Strip]

Respondents demand that their identity be simply *"seen as 'human':"* *"living one's Palestinian-ness"* while remaining *"loyal to the state"* in Jordan, getting *"recognition"* and *"rights as human beings"* in Lebanon and in the oPt, and *"helping the [Palestinian] cause everywhere,"* including from the diaspora as the respondents from Syria said.

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<sup>27</sup> Gabiam, N. (2016), *The politics of suffering: Syria's Palestinian refugee camps*. Indiana University Press.

## 2.2 Awareness and education to support youth to live better with their identity

Part of the 'identity dilemmas' refugee youth endure pertains, according to respondents particularly in Lebanon and Jordan, to the growing chasm between the images of Palestine they conjure up, namely the "*country of beauty*" or the "*sacred land they are struggling to recover*," and the way Palestine is tackled in their education system, be it in the oPt or in the Arab host countries. Most respondents openly resent the fact that the 'Question of Palestine' had become increasingly marginal, if not absent, in their education curricula, although it has been a central element of the contemporary history of the Middle East. Given its prominence, they insist, "*it should be discussed more*." Respondents in the oPt also perceived a gradual disappearance of pre-1948 Palestine history and geography from the current curricula: "*in the past, there was more about Palestine, the Palestinian people and the occupation than today*." They believed such a trend to result from external pressures exerted by key Western donors on the PA in exchange for their financial support as a means of "*diminishing their Palestinian consciousness*" in order to achieve a "*cheap peace treaty with Israel [detrimental] to the Palestinians' interests*."

These perceptions are compounded by the fact that in recent years, UNRWA, which applies the host country curriculum, has been increasingly reluctant to support cultural activities that allow "*the display of Palestinian national identity*." UNRWA justifies this on the ground of its above mentioned neutrality policy which the refugees interpret as a way "*not to upset Israel and its Western donors*:"

*"UNRWA gives a lot to us, but I ask it to include Palestinian history as a subject... youth need to grow up knowing who they are, why they are refugees and what is the place they call homeland and want to return to."* [Male respondent, Shatila camp, Lebanon]

Respondents appreciate the pressure UNRWA finds itself under, although they do not understand why the agency "*shies away from protecting the identity of the refugees*" by de-historicizing it.

A number of respondents expressed their belief that greater awareness about "*who Palestinians are, where they come from and why*" may help address patterns of discrimination against the Palestinians in host societies. Some respondents suggested that "*people would realize how the concept of 'Palestinian resistance' is still present among [the youth]:*" not as "*military struggle to liberate the land including through armed force*," but as militancy "*to liberate the people*" through the strength of human rights and the empowerment of education and equal opportunities. These are, *inter alia*, concepts that Palestinian refugee organizations such as Ai'doun Lebanon and Syria have tried to address during the past two decades or so through their annual 'right to return' summer camps for Palestinian refugee youth.



### 3. Aspirations for the future: wishes and dilemmas

Main findings:

- (1) Youth stand firmly for their right of return, which means first and foremost ensuring Israel's accountability for the lack of realization of such right, as well as right to choose where to go and live in dignity today. While they demand 'return to Palestine', the notion of Palestine is used to refer to either the future State of Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza, or pre-1948 Palestine (with or without reference to Israel).
- (2) In the short run, respondents demand acquiring rights in host or third countries, starting with proper education, decent jobs, and other 'opportunities'. This is not seen as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause or as forfeiting the right to return to historical Palestine
- (3) Critical to the realization of their aspirations, youth claim the right to mobilize, within a space where they can discuss, unite and advocate as Palestinians, as well as, as part of their host society
- (4) Despite its limitations, UNRWA is seen as part of the Palestinian cause for justice and must be preserved and protected.

How do the many constraints imposed on the lives of refugee youth amidst a deteriorated socioeconomic and political environment define the way they envisage their future? When addressing this question, respondents systematically referred not only to contributions to restore justice, freedom and dignity, but also to the need to enjoy a normal life, where freedom to study, travel abroad, and work should be fully secured. Moreover, many respondents today claim for a new way of 'fighting' for their individual and collective rights. This would encapsulate, beside the right of return (to present-day Israel) and the right for self-determination (through the establishment of a Palestinian state), the right to live in dignity, be it in neighbouring host countries or elsewhere in the Western world. This would not mean reneging their right of return.

#### 3.1 Return, an ever-present claim for justice

Whenever asked about their future, the question of return remains present in the refugees' discourse, and indissolubly linked to their future, as a key element of Palestinian refugee moral and political consciousness:

*"We grow with this right of return inside us, with this call for 'return' even when we have nothing... [Refugees] teach their kids about the places they come from before anything else, and that one day they will return to them. It is a religious ritual."* [Male respondent, Bourj el-Brajneh camp, Lebanon]



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The sentiment that the principle of return remains “*sacred*” and cannot be given up – not even in exchange for compensation<sup>28</sup> – is well captured by the words of a respondent from Jordan: “*we cannot give up on the right of return; in the same way we cannot give up our child.*” By and large, respondents acknowledged that the emotional component of the right of return is intertwined with the legal and political aspects of it, but as long as “*the question [is] not resolved according to what international law says,*” it will be difficult to reach a dignified solution for the refugees.

Respondents concur that they are entitled to return “*as a matter of right.*” Yet, a range of different opinions were given about how return could/should be implemented in practice, given the current impossibility to return *en masse* to modern-day Israel. One issue discussed with respondents from Jordan, Lebanon and Syria concerned whether return should mean returning to their ancestors’ original places of origin, now located in Israel, or to a future independent Palestinian state<sup>29</sup>. While only a handful respondents were outspoken about their intention *not to return*, and to live elsewhere (in Europe for instance), and a number – mainly from Lebanon – are adamant about their will to “*return to [their] grandparents’ house, where some members of the [their] family still live,*” a significant number of respondents in/from the host countries seemed unsure they would want to live in modern-day Israel (i.e. under Israeli rule) or even in the State of Palestine (which for many, would mean to live “*under Israel’s oppression*”). This is perhaps more evident in Jordan, where some respondents timidly admitted that they would not want to leave Jordan, which –in the words of a camp respondent with Jordanian citizenship– “*does not mean that I have forgotten my roots, which remain Palestinian.*”

The fact that the prospects of Palestinian self-determination and peace with Israel have never been so remote probably impacts youth’s perceptions of possibilities and choices. Many respondents also indicated that they would go back to Palestine (mostly to the State of Palestine, not Israel) if they could, and, in the words of a respondent from Lebanon, “*they would do more for Palestine if they had better [living] conditions.*” Other respondents concurred, indicating their willingness to engage further in social and political activities to raise the cause for justice in Palestine. Similar types of statements were made by respondents from Syria who are now asylum seekers in the US, Canada and Europe: “*going to Palestine, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, would be a dream.*” In the impossibility of making that dream come true – they concur – going to places where they can enjoy safety, freedom from persecution and escape abject poverty, may also give more opportunities to

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<sup>28</sup> Compensation in exchange for return as an option available for refugees in UN General Assembly Resolution 194, was barely mentioned, and is even perhaps not fully understood, by most respondents. While some inferred that there should be compensation paid to these refugees “*alongside return and not instead of it*”, others looked sceptical about how this can be realized and in a way that does not translate into a “*betrayal of justice.*” And, as a young female refugee from the West Bank put it, “*How can you compensate a people for the loss of a whole country?*” [female respondent, WB]

<sup>29</sup> This was not discussed in the oPt, where refugees already live in the territories of the possible future State of Palestine: for them only a return to pre-1948 Palestine was discussed.

further contribute to the Palestinian cause as well as to their host country, for example, a new Syria, which is now *“also part of our identity,”* as a respondent currently in Canada said.

All respondents agree that the right to return belongs *“by way of right”* to each and every refugee, which means, first and foremost, that *“refugees should be given the opportunity to choose,”* whether to exercise the right or to choose its alternative, i.e. compensation, as well as to live elsewhere. Many also concur that it is important *“to talk about what return means in practice”* for both the refugees and the question of Palestine at a moment when *“Palestine is disappearing from the map of issues waiting to be solved,”* as one respondent noted. Actualizing what return means under international law and what it may entail in practice is linked to *“[holding] Israel accountable for the [lack of realization of the] right of return.”* Youth concur that restitution of properties that the refugees left behind as of 1948 should be non-negotiable. Israel’s accountability for past and ongoing wrongdoing is also a key aspect of the Palestinian quest for justice that emerges from this study. Accountability, respondents said, must begin by halting *“Israel’s violations against the Palestinians.”* This starts by lifting the blockade in the Gaza Strip and ending the occupation and associated repressive practices in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

One striking feature of how respondents seem to see return is pragmatism. Respondents appeared keen to embrace solutions that reconcile decent living anywhere they can and pursue the realization of their return which is *“part of the past and of the future”* – as a female youth stated, rejecting the connotation of return as an *“old-fashion topic”* – through the peaceful struggle for *all* the rights Palestinians are entitled to.

### 3.2 Awaiting return or emigration: solutions for a dignified life

In discussions concerning the future, it emerged strongly from all FGDs that the prospects of realization of the right of return should not keep other rights *“on stand-by.”* This is especially true among respondents who are under the yoke of Israeli’s occupation, in a difficult economic situation, or have a precarious legal status. Respondents realize that many civil rights have been sacrificed on the altar of politics, and many do not see the need for this. Some respondents articulated the need to explore means that were previously considered ‘taboo’, such as the acquisition of citizenship in another country. For many respondents, reconciling the continuous struggle for Palestinians’ rights with the more individual aspirations for a decent life, be it inside or outside refugee camps, is seen as key to deliver justice to the Palestinians and to enable them to think of a better and a more stable future. While a minority of respondents argued that being citizens of another country would make them lose their entitlement to self-determination in Palestine or their right to return to the territory corresponding to historical Palestine, most respondents do not see the betterment of their rights in host countries or elsewhere as incompatible with their right of return. For that matter, respondents in Jordan do not consider their Jordanian citizenship a hindrance to their rights as descendants of the original refugees from Palestine. Notably, refugees from Syria

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now living in Canada and the Netherlands who are waiting for conferral of citizenship of these countries indicated that they would use their new national passports *"to go to Palestine and Israel"*.

The energy and enthusiasm unleashed by the respondents during discussions about the wished future in the medium and long run did not mitigate the fear that living conditions at large may well continue to deteriorate in the short run, thus undermining any chance to fulfil their aspirations. While youth know that their claims to live in dignity, safety and peace are legitimate, some hopelessness transpired when discussing how this could materialize. For the reasons discussed above (section 1), very few see themselves able to influence their future where they are, with a significant difference among those who enjoy citizenship of the country in which they reside (i.e. Jordan and, only occasionally, Lebanon or Syria). Those who have acquired a nationality (mostly Palestinians in Jordan and some Palestinians with a Lebanese father) recognize their comparative advantage over the majority of the refugees in UNRWA area of operations who have remained stateless. Some respondents in the latter category felt a sense of "paralysis" when thinking of how to improve their situation. The life they dream of "is just the opposite of what they have" but they see little hope of changing it. Others resent not being "treated as a human being" and are determined to change this.

Camp refugees feel particularly vulnerable, and many feel *"trapped in the box that the camp represents."* *"There was nothing here for my previous thirty years and there may be nothing more for the next thirty,"* said a camp resident from the West Bank sarcastically. Fleeing abroad and seeking asylum anywhere they can, appears for some the only viable situation:

*"I am a failure. I can't do anything; I am just surviving. My only hope is to flee [Jordan] and seek asylum elsewhere."* [Ex-Gazan' female respondent, Jordan]

When asked about where they would go, the majority responded: *"not in Arab countries,"* as *"Arab states do not welcome Palestinians anymore."* Through globalized media, youth are plainly aware of the reality experienced by their peers in the Arab region and point to Iraq, Syria, but also places like Saudi Arabia, where Palestinians are increasingly discriminated against and even persecuted. Pressure to leave seems to first affect camp refugees with limited opportunities within the host society. As a woman in charge of a community-based organization in Baqaa camp put it: *"Ask any refugee in the camp... they would all tell you 'I want to go to Canada or to America... there is no more Palestine."* This particularly concerns Palestinians who face a specific, discriminatory legal status in host countries and feel segregated, such as the 'ex-Gazans' in Jordan or the 'non-IDs' in Lebanon (mainly Palestinians from the Gaza Strip or Jordan who joined the PLO in Lebanon after 1969-1970 and whose original Jordanian or Egyptian IDs were not renewed)<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> See Annex I.

*"I would be the last person to leave. But I have no work, no money, and I don't want my son to curse me like I cursed my father and my father cursed his father."* [Male respondent, Bourj el-Brajneh camp, Lebanon]

In fact, respondents from Lebanon point to the fact that such flight (or migration) has been under way since the late 1970s, during the civil war, and has accelerated again in recent years. One argued that *"more than sixty percent of [Palestinian refugees registered in Lebanon] are already outside,"* and while generations of Palestinians *"hang on to what they know [Lebanon] out of fear [of life abroad],"*<sup>31</sup> young generations are frustrated by the lack of 'space' for them, but also by the continuous abuses in both West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which raise condemnation at best with no tangible consequences for Israel. In Syria, it is difficult to predict how the situation will evolve for the Palestinians. Yet, in many ways the situation of Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) epitomizes the fate of the Palestinian people as a whole. Perpetually exposed to the risk of dispersal/displacement, they give a sense of what it means to be in protracted exile, unprotected, stateless, and longing for a solution that appears out of reach. Those PRS this study reached out to, appear clearly traumatized and lonely, including because they found themselves outside the familiar support network of both their Palestinian community and Syria. *"I can't think of the future anymore,"* said a respondent from Syria currently in Europe. *"The present is enough to worry about."* Many of them may need psychosocial support to overcome the trauma of the war and new societal splintering they went through.

*"I have been in therapy for a long time now, I'm stuck in the present that I do not like, in the vicious cycle of not knowing."* [Male respondent from Syria, in the US]

### 3.3 Future now: empowerment as an interim way out

For most respondents, the present situation is untenable. As expressed by a refugee youth: *"things cannot continue as they are."* Eventually, many fear that *"the situation will explode."* There was a widespread fear among the respondents that desperate youth stand ready to sacrifice their lives, as demonstrated during the 'Knife Intifada' in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 2015-2016<sup>32</sup>, or the Great March of Return in the Gaza Strip in 2018-2019<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> This is validated by the recent census of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon: about 175,000 Palestinian refugees from Lebanon still live in Lebanon, whereas the number of persons registered there stands at 475,000; see <http://www.lpdc.gov.lb/DocumentFiles/Key%20Findings%20report%20En-636566196639789418.pdf>; and [https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa\\_in\\_figures\\_2019\\_eng\\_sep\\_2019\\_final.pdf](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa_in_figures_2019_eng_sep_2019_final.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> During the said period, 235 Palestinians were killed and 4,000 injured (40 Israelis were killed and 560 wounded); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015%E2%80%932016\\_wave\\_of\\_violence\\_in\\_Israeli-Palestinian\\_conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015%E2%80%932016_wave_of_violence_in_Israeli-Palestinian_conflict)

<sup>33</sup> 183 Palestinians were killed and 9,200 injured, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018%E2%80%932019\\_Gaza\\_border\\_protests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018%E2%80%932019_Gaza_border_protests)

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Key to any discussion regarding their immediate future is the need for proper education as a means for emancipation, especially in the present digitalized economy and interconnected world. Indirectly, education was also perceived as likely to provide protected spaces for them to discuss freely and develop important networks beyond the family circle. This is especially the case in university where, according to graduates from Balata camp (West Bank) and Beddawi camp (Lebanon), the regular attendance at such institutions offered them for the first time the opportunity to mingle with peers from outside the camps on an equal footing. As a result, they had expanded their private networks and reviewed their stances towards social values, religion, politics, and the world at large.

Respondents also noted that youth generally wish for UNRWA be “*protected*” and “*preserved*” until a just and durable solution is found to the refugee issue.

*“UNRWA it’s us, it is like if it was almost part of our struggle and our existence now.”* [Male respondent, Arroub camp, West Bank]

Despite certain frustration toward the agency, respondents strongly lamented (what they perceived to be) the little international response toward the gradual demise of UNRWA, and the continuous attacks on its activities, resources, and premises, especially in Jerusalem. They also expressed criticism toward their own community at large for not trying to oppose the weakening of UNRWA: “*in past times, a mere change in any of its programmes or services provoked great anxiety and strong reactions [among the refugees],*” one respondent said. The fact that refugees remain mostly passive nowadays is read by some respondents as a sign that they may have given up on trying to change the way the agency operates. Respondents want to have their community reengaged around the defence and support of UNRWA’s mandate.

In general, respondents believe that positive, creative remobilization within their community(ies) is necessary. Youth feel they can (and want to) be an important trigger in this mobilization, but also recognize they need space to contribute to forming and advancing “*an agenda*” for the future. They are aware that changing society needs long-term planning and long-term investment, and they demand to be part of such process. Most respondents feel strongly that a solution is most needed, and no solutions can be achieved without involving the refugees, asking them – and “*not only the PA*” – what they think the solutions should be. Youth claim their “*right to make choices as Palestinians,*” as a movement of “*liberation wherever it is,*” said a young refugee from the West Bank. “*Consultation is not enough,*” they say while demanding “*real participation.*” Youth long for change and firmly oppose being used as political pawns.

*“For the PA the refugee camp should remain a symbol of resistance, how can we grow if this is the expectation upon us?”* [Male respondent, Al Fawwar camp, West Bank]



They envisage discussions and debates with their peers that would lead to the development of shared reform strategies. The context is important to determine how to bring about such a possibility. For example, while respondents in Lebanon appeared to feel generally powerless in the host society, respondents from Syria who are now in Europe and North America felt that they are in a better position to shape their future *"now as asylum seekers"* and *"future citizens of a democratic country"* than in Syria as a Palestinian refugee. They feel they now have better control and freedom over their life and the capacity to orient it according to personal choices. Those who live in the camps feel the need for a general framework that allows them to gain agency as *"makers of their own destiny"* and that of their community. Who could develop such a framework? Respondents were uncertain: host authorities or camp leaderships, who had so far failed to include them in their decision-making processes? Financially-stricken UNRWA, which has been struggling to maintain even its basic services mandate in the past years<sup>34</sup>? International/bilateral cooperation agencies, whose interventions are most often limited to short-time projects?

While it remains unclear what opportunities young refugees can be offered in the current political context in Palestine and the region at large, it is apparent that they are a mobilizing force that is being unduly constrained by layers of oppression and adverse legal, economic and political circumstances. The new generation of refugees, as it emerges from this study, has the enthusiasm, realism and the critical capacity to play an important role in reshaping and bringing forward the Palestinian discourse, reviving/actualizing collective aspirations for historical justice and the realization of inalienable rights, but also by prioritizing the recognition of fundamental individual rights. This passes through the staging of a broad 'human rights-campaign' which, without forfeiting any of the crucial issues of the cause for justice in and for Palestine, supports Palestinian refugee youth's social and political aspirations.

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<sup>34</sup> UNRWA has attempted to give visibility to Palestinian refugee youth as actors for change. See UNRWA, "Youth Works: building on the potential of Palestine refugee youth" a conference that gathered high-level international and regional stakeholders and Palestinian refugee youth from the five UNRWA fields and its follow-up (Brussels, March 2012). The initiative, which was focused more on promoting the cause of refugee youth than supporting youth networking itself, was not followed up because of lack of funds and turmoil/shifting priorities in the region. UNRWA: <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-unveils-ten-youth-commitments>.



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#### **4. Priority areas and recommendations**

This section puts forward recommendations to address priorities identified through discussions with Palestinian refugee youth that would allow enhanced participation in issues related to their community, and with the 'Palestinian polity' at large pending the advent of a just and durable solution. The aim is to overcome the current constraints in a way that respects youth's political identity and collective aspirations and offers them opportunities for social and political mobilization.

The operational recommendations presented below are addressed to local and international stakeholders.

They are regrouped into four global priority areas. Annex II summarizes the recommendations and includes relevant stakeholders that are invited to follow up.

##### **I. Allow youth to take part in decision-making processes at community level**

The current situation of marginalization among youth can be addressed locally, where refugees live, study and work. It is recommended:

1. To encourage, with financial and technical resources, refugee youth participation through the establishment of autonomous frameworks that allow them to develop and implement community projects of their choice;
2. To review Camp ('Popular' or 'Services') Committees' electoral/appointment processes in order to ensure the direct and effective participation of the youth in decision-making processes. Such a recommendation is extendable to any institution implementing community projects in the camps or refugee communities;
3. To ensure the protection and safety of those engaging in social and political participation in accordance with the international standards that protect human rights advocates;
4. To trigger discussion within and among political leadership, camp communities and youth about the need to better include all traditionally marginalized segments of the society, including the youth, in decision-making processes affecting them.

## **II. Giving voice to the refugee youth's efforts to promote their internationally-recognized rights**

To mitigate the impact of the weakening of the Palestinian political movement, the absence of a credible political leadership for Palestinians across the exile, and address the challenges of 'feeling like unwelcome foreigners' in the host societies, youth's willingness to be part of wider civic/political processes affecting them should be supported.

5. To support Palestinian refugee youth to establish national and regional networks/platforms across the Near East to channel, through youth leaders, their ideas about Palestine and their rights as Palestinian refugees, thereby asserting their relevance in political processes affecting them. This may trigger important opportunities for Palestinian refugee youth to influence their present conditions and political future.
6. To support youth to organize an international forum of Palestinian refugee youth worldwide, once the national/regional networks/platforms are established. This would serve to discuss strategy, priorities and joint actions that should be organized and mechanisms to bring youth deliberations and recommendations to the attention of the political leadership and international community, including UNRWA [or UNHCR outside UNRWA's area of operations], that should be established.

## **III. Support culturally initiatives about the Palestinian refugee question**

7. To support Palestinian refugee youth's relationship with their complex identity, addressing questions pertaining to their 'roots' would constitute an important psychological support. This should be a key concern and component of youth empowerment activities and other related interventions in camps.
8. To provide youth with educational opportunities (spaces, sponsored activities) to discuss Palestinian history and its international context, so that they can explore and preserve their Palestinian identity and at the same time gain increased understanding of the positions and attitudes of their host states and communities.
9. To make sure that UNRWA schools, which follow national curricula, reinstate –as educational enrichment activity– age appropriate content/classes on the Palestinian refugee question (origins, developments, current situation). Given the sensitivity of the matter, reputable and non-politicized historians could be called to be part of this project.

10. To create opportunities to promote a positive image and discussion of the role of Palestinian (refugee) youth in host societies through raising awareness activities (forums, events). This may have a positive impact on Palestinians in host countries' living conditions and access to dignified livelihood and opportunities.

#### **IV. Make youth-focused initiatives effectively 'youth centred'**

Youth programs focusing on empowerment and psychosocial support for males and females provide critical support to youth at a key stage of their life, often amid challenging circumstances. Therefore, it is recommended

11. To assess/evaluate impact of past and current youth empowerment initiatives on youth and their families. While each program/initiative undergoes its own evaluation and assessment, an overall comparative assessment of various initiatives is lacking. *[Practically this can be done by promoting discussion among the main stakeholders of youth related programs at country/regional level, and representatives of Palestinian refugee youth. This, if carried out at the national and then regional level, can allow donors and supporting NGOs to understand collectively the strengths and areas for improvement of the various initiatives to support youth].*
12. That the youth components of development and humanitarian programmes and projects be tailored to youth priorities, which requires that youth at large (regardless of their affiliations) participate in their elaboration.
13. That youth initiatives and programs in camps include measures promoting safety and security, which in turn should reduce the perception of the camps as 'spaces of exception,' where rule of law does not run.

## ANNEX I

### Overview of Palestinian refugee documentation status in the Near East

This table offers an overview of the documentation status of the various groups referred to in the book only.

	Jordan	Lebanon	West Bank	Gaza Strip	Syria
<b>Refugees from 1948 and descendants</b>					
Citizenship	Yes	No (unless with Lebanese father)	Not de jure De facto Palestinian "citizenship"	Not de jure De facto Palestinian "citizenship"	No (unless with Syrian father)
Identification Documents	Passport with National Number, ID card	Laiss-er-passer (travel document only)	Palestinian Authority (PA) passport, PA IDs	Palestinian Authority (PA) travel document/ passport and IDs similar to non-refugees (including non-recognized by Israel)	Travel Document for Palestine refugees, GAPAR-issued ID

<b>Refugees from ,1967 aka 1967' displaced persons 'and descendants</b>					
Citizenship	No	No	n/a	n/a	No
Identification Documents	5-year valid passports (laiss-er-passer)  <u>Ex-Gazans:</u> 2-year valid passport (travel document only) and ID card.	<u>Non-IDs</u> (post 1967 with non-valid IDs from Jordan, West Bank and Egypt)  "Proof of nationality" leave by the Palestine Embassy in Lebanon.	n/a	n/a	n/a

Palestinians in the Near East have enjoyed varying status and treatment depending on a number of factors (time of arrival, political climate toward them, socio-economic status; family, political or religious affiliation; shifting attitudes toward the Palestinian leadership. In short, those who became refugees in 1948 were generally granted legal residence in Syria (where they have been treated almost *au pair* with citizens), Lebanon (where they have been treated largely as foreigners) and citizenship in Jordan (which from 1949 to 1988 extended its parliamentary franchise to the West Bank, treating also its residents as Jordanian citizens). Those in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, have had various statuses under Israel's occupation: since 1967 they 'enjoy' de facto the same status and treatment as other indigenous Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (while Palestinians in East Jerusalem have Israeli residency cards). Among those who were displaced in 1967, some lost/changed the status they had inherited in the wake of the 1948 war: this is the case of those who fled the Gaza Strip to Jordan in 1967/1968 and where not granted Jordanian citizenship (but simply a travel document). The 'Non-IDs' in Lebanon, namely persons who could no longer renew the initial Egyptians or Jordanian IDs, stay in the country largely undocumented.

## ANNEX II - Table of recommendations

Youth's voiced priorities /recommendations		Relevant stakeholder(s)
Allow youth to take part in decision-making processes at community level		
1.	Support the <b>establishment of autonomous frameworks</b> that allow youth to develop and implement community projects of their choice	Local authorities International cooperation
2.	Ensure youth direct and effective participation in <b>electoral/appointment processes</b> of the Camp ('Popular' or 'Services') Committees *Such a recommendation is extendable to any institution implementing community projects in the camps or refugee communities	Camp committees *CBOs and local/int'l organizations
3.	Ensure <b>safety</b> of those engaging in socio-political mobilization in accordance with the international standards for human rights advocates	Local authorities *CBOs and local/int'l organizations
4.	Provoke discussion within and among leadership, camp communities and youth about the need to better <b>include all traditionally marginalized segments of the society</b> , including the youth, in decision-making processes affecting them.	Camp authorities *CBOs and local/int'l organizations
Give voice to the refugee youth's efforts to promote their internationally- recognized rights		
5.	Support Palestinian refugee youth to <b>establish national and regional networks/platforms across the Near East</b> to channel, through youth leaders, their ideas about Palestine and their rights as Palestinian refugees, thereby asserting their relevance in political processes affecting them. This can be the vehicle for youth to play a role in determining their present conditions, access to livelihood and opportunities, as well as their political future.	Youth organizations *CBOs and local/int'l organizations
6.	Once the national/regional networks/platforms are established, help youth to organize an <b>international forum of Palestinian refugee youth worldwide</b> . <b>This platform can serve to discussing strategy, priorities and joint actions to be organized and mechanisms</b> to bring youth deliberations and recommendations to the attention of the political leadership and international community and UNRWA [or UNHCR outside UNRWA's area of operations].	PLO UNRWA Int'l organizations



Support culturally initiatives about the Palestinian refugee question		
7.	Include questions pertaining to <b>Palestinian identity and their 'roots'</b> as part of youth empowerment activities and other related interventions affecting youth.	PLO Local and int'l organizations
8.	Provide youth with <b>educational opportunities (spaces, sponsored activities) to discuss Palestinian</b> history and its international context (Palestinian refugee question)	Host countries authorities PLO International/local organizations working with Palestinians/youth
9.	UNRWA schools to reinstate –e.g. as educational enrichment activity– age <b>appropriate content/ classes on the Palestinian refugee question</b> (origins, developments, current situation).	UNRWA in cooperation with reputable historians
10.	Create opportunities to <b>promote a positive image of and discussion around the role of Palestinian (refugee) youth in host societies</b> and internationally, through awareness raising activities (forums, events).	Host authorities Local and Int'l organizations
Make youth-focused initiatives effectively 'youth centred'		
11.	<b>Assess/evaluate impact of past and current youth empowerment initiatives</b> on youth and their families.	Int'l organizations working with youth (UN and bilateral/int'l cooperation)
12.	Tailor <b>youth components of development and humanitarian programmes</b> /projects based to youth priorities and together with youth's effective involvement	Int'l organizations working with youth (UN and bilateral/int'l cooperation)
13.	Include measures promoting <b>safety and security</b> in youth initiatives and programs in camps	Int'l organizations working with youth (UN and bilateral/int'l cooperation)

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