

**2007 INTERNATIONAL ESSAY COMPETITION:
ENGAGING YOUTH IN REFORM**

CITIZENSHIP IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

EMPOWER

PALESTINIAN YOUTH

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In any society, youth is the leading force for change. They are the pillars on which a nation builds its future, the bridge between what is and what could be.

Citizenship is the result of a feeling of belonging: belonging to a nation, to a country, to an entity united by its past and by its will to draw a common future. Citizenship means getting involved in the life of the city; feeling, as one of its members, a responsibility for building its future. Democracy means respecting political plurality and the power of the people to elect and hold accountable policy makers in order to ensure good governance.

The worst enemy of citizenship and democracy is for a citizen to feel powerless, unable to play his/her natural role in the decision making process, in the destiny of a country, in his/her own destiny. In Palestine, one of our great successes is our ability to be a democracy in spite of the ongoing Israeli occupation. Nevertheless, our people in general and our youth in particular feel increasingly powerless. This results essentially from occupation but there are other factors that we have to confront. Our political system is out of breath, our people have no prospects, and despair is gaining ground. It is therefore time for a rebirth.

Before prescribing any medicine, a diagnosis is needed to understand the challenges to face.

THE DIAGNOSIS

The Palestinian resistance in the 50's was launched by students dreaming of freedom and return. They were able to build one of the most important national liberation movements of the century. Today this movement needs to be reformed. A new generation can trigger this change and carry out positive evolutions.

▪ **The place of youth in society**

The majority of the Palestinian people within the 1967 borders is less than 18 years old. 1/3 of the population is between 10 and 24 years old¹. Youth has therefore a leading role to play in the future of our people because of our demographic composition and because it is very active in our national struggle.

▪ **A very politicised youth**

Our youth is probably one of the most politicised in the world. The resistance against occupation and the will of the Palestinians to have a popular movement gave youth a central role. Each party has its youth organisation.

In universities, students' councils' elections are followed by the political class as signals of the tendencies in the country. In spite of the presence of non-political associations, it is mostly the political parties themselves that are present in these elections, and students can choose between the lists of Fatah, Hamas, National Initiative... with the same coalitions that you may find at the national level. This is disturbing as the students' councils do not deal with the same issues as the political parties. Coalitions should rather reflect the position of the different lists on subjects concerning students.

These annual elections lead to debates, confrontations and even sometimes clashes. Universities consider these elections as essential in a democratic country².

▪ **The forgotten (young) Palestinian refugees**

The national movement was mainly composed of the diaspora. The first Intifada, the Oslo agreements followed by the creation of the Palestinian Authority changed that tendency. The Palestinian diaspora was for a long time organised through associations and represented within the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Both these associations and the PLO which represents all Palestinians are going through a deep crisis.

Refugees are deprived of their civic rights since they do not participate in the elections organised by the Palestinian Authority and the last elections for the Palestinian National Council within the PLO date from 20 years ago. They can therefore only exercise their citizenship at a local level. The 2 main associations representing Palestinians abroad, the General Union of Palestine Students (GUPS), the main and more active body, and the Jaliya (Community) are no longer receiving the attention they deserve. As if Palestinian political life was limited within the boundaries of 1967.

Furthermore, most NGOs working with Palestinian youth concentrate on Palestinians within the 1967 borders.

¹ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Palestinian Youth: Facts and figures*, December 2001.

² For an example: Birzeit University, http://www.birzeit.edu/news/news-d?news_id=101270.

Palestinian refugees represent more than half of the Palestinian population. We are, by ignoring them, depriving ourselves of talents, energies, and committed people. Young Palestinians, who often have the will to preserve their links with Palestine, are not given the means to do so. The exclusion of refugees from the decision making process undermines our democracy.

- **An implicated and yet powerless youth**

Many associations work on the development of youth. Nevertheless most associations concentrate essentially on inter-youth development. This is of course very important because youth have specific needs and interests. But youth have a role to play within society in a much broader way. Young people have their opinions on politics, economy, society and these opinions must not only be addressed to youth but to everybody.

Our youth is politicised, involved in the national struggle and yet ignored by the political groups. Most political leaders are over 60 years old and there are not so many people from the new generation who were given either the opportunity or the space to emerge.

Those people participating in youth in political parties should be more involved in the decision making process and not only be there to meet with other youth in political parties or go to rallies. They should be heard and their opinions respected, not only because they are the leaders of tomorrow, but because on the ground, they are the most present. In order to have influence, some have chosen to resort to violence thus undermining Palestinian unity. This is the worst solution and it is time to give this youth other means to decide on its future.

THE SOLUTIONS TO DISMISS

I have to begin by excluding three ways ahead

- There is nothing that can be built on ruin or chaos, it is therefore important to preserve what we have built even if an in-depth change is needed. We have therefore to use the structures built by our predecessors, reinvest in them, ensure their democratic evolution and allow them to play their role as the tool for citizenship to express itself.
- The second road to be excluded is the idea that new leadership means better leadership. There is an urgent need for reforms and these reforms have the support of some of the old guard and some of the new. Nothing good can come from a generational war. If young people have the right to be part of the decision making process, they should not do so against those who are more experienced and have realized honourable achievements. To be able to solve the problems we should not personalize them and acknowledge they are structural and need an institutional response that goes further than just changing people. The Palestinian Authority was supposed to be a temporary entity leading to a Palestinian state. This temporary situation is lasting while the context is increasingly deteriorating. The ongoing occupation makes it even more difficult to reform a body that is emptied of any competence not to say sovereignty. It is nevertheless our responsibility to rebuild our political system and our society in order to face the challenges ahead.
- The third road that has to be dismissed is the idea of a small group, or one person paving the way to change. Any change needs to be sought by the people and approved by it. It is important that any policy does not only concern an elite who have tremendous opportunities while the majority is left aside. When you have such a specific context as the one we know in Palestine, these elite will inevitably be rejected by the population. There is a need to give these opportunities to the largest possible public in a manner to allow the less fortunate access to them.

What are then the means for our generation to hold in its hands the pen to draw its destiny?

PROPOSALS FOR A REMEDY

Some of these proposals can be applied to other countries than Palestine, as a way to single out our deep desire for normality, for thinking outside the boundaries set by occupation. Most proposals are nevertheless linked to the particularities of Palestine.

▪ **Participation in the electoral process**

One of the most fundamental acts for a citizen is to vote or to run for office. There are means to promote the participation of youth in elections as voters and as candidates.

As a voter

❶ Organizing simulation of elections for adolescents

Our youth participated massively in the last presidential and general elections. Measures could nevertheless be adopted to accustom youth to the political process and elections. One important measure could be for adolescents to organize votes in schools at the same time as local and general elections, ask students to campaign even for candidates who defend ideas opposite to their own, to organize debates, to vote, and to count votes. They will thus take the time to get to know the programme of each candidate, to find out how you register on the electoral lists and how you vote.

As a candidate

❷ Lowering the age for eligibility

The first measure should be to lower the age of eligibility to become a candidate. To run in local elections you must be 25 years old, whilst in general elections the minimum age required is 28 years. For a country with such an important young population, this age requirement is particularly high. Our youth is involved in political life at a very early age and holds huge responsibilities. 21 or 23 would therefore be a more reasonable age requirement.

❸ Establishing a quota for youth between 21 and 30 years old

In Palestine, both Christians and women enjoy quotas for local and general elections. The local level is very important because there are already a lot of young people involved and it is time to allow them to enter the political field. It is of course always better if political groups decide without a quota to give their normal place to youth who are so involved in political life in Palestine. If this seems not to be the case, for any reason, such as lack of trust, refusal to renew the political class or doubts about their ability to win an election, we should consider seriously having quotas for a limited time in order to allow the emergence of a young leadership. Within this quota, young women should be much more present than the percentage required today. Women play an active role in our society and our struggle. They are true assets to our people and we must ensure they enjoy the place they deserve in the political and social field.

- **The opportunity to receive, the duty to give**

④ Conditioning aid to commitment to become involved in social and civic activities

The first objective must be to give opportunities to the less fortunate, to allow them to travel and to study abroad. It is possible to finance those studies or training while conditioning this funding to their commitment to come back and work on helping others in Palestine in a specific field. Birzeit University, for example, provides scholarships to its best students in exchange of their commitment to come back and become a Professor in the university for a certain number of years when they have finished their doctorate.

This system should be generalized. The student who benefits from a scholarship could commit to come back to Palestine to work in his university, an NGO, a public institution or in a firm in his field of specialization. This system will allow us to counter the brain drain.

Another possibility is to give young Palestinians the possibility to obtain preferential access to credit in exchange for a specific commitment that the beneficiary will engage in educational, economic, social and civic activities.

- **Interaction between youth and the rest of the society**

As mentioned above, a lot of associations work for youth. PYALARA³ does great work in that field by publishing a youth magazine⁴ and broadcasting TV shows⁵ made by youth for youth. It is also a first contact with studios, newspapers, associative life. But it is important to ensure interaction between youth and society as a whole.

⑤ Offering youth a space in the main newspapers

In addition to having youth newspapers the main newspapers in the country, in each section, should leave a space for youth to express themselves. It is important to allow youth to have their impact on society and their opinion recognized and listened to.

⑥ Creating a Journal of Young Palestinians' Studies

One other concrete step could be to establish a Journal of Young Palestinians' Studies, edited by young Palestinians, allowing our youth to publish their research and articles. The best pieces could then be published by the Journal of Palestine Studies (the English, French or Arabic publication)⁶. This will ensure visibility for a larger number of research and researchers. It will also offer a space for interaction between young researchers.

³ *Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership And Rights Activations*, www.pyalara.org

⁴ *The Youth Times*, monthly magazine in both Arabic and English.

⁵ The show launched by PYALARA in 2002 is called *Alli Sotak* (Speak Up); <http://www.pyalara.org/tv.htm>

⁶ <http://www.palestine-studies.org>

▪ **The transit from military resistance to social and political involvement**

⑦ Accompanying former combatants wishing to go back to civilian life

Some young people who joined the military resistance wish to go back to civilian life. It is important to ensure that they have this possibility as they are true assets for society and enjoy an important legitimacy that could make some of them the leaders of tomorrow. One important example is Zakariah Zubeidi⁷, one of the leaders of the Martyr Brigades of Al Aqsa. While pleading in favour of military resistance, he always opposed attacking civilians. Zubeidi has a real political vision and calls for coexistence. He begun sociology studies but is unable to follow the course because his life is always in danger.

For those who have witnessed the determination of these young people, the beauty of their dreams and the nightmare they are living through, it is evident that we cannot allow ourselves to loose them. Of course, their safety should be ensured, and Israel should be stopped from pursuing its illegal policy of extrajudicial killings. But it is also the responsibility of the Palestinian government to ensure them access to education⁸, maybe even summer classes to enable those who missed classes to catch up. They should also have access to training and jobs. Their participation in the political field is important, as it is in our people's interest to include those who have fought for the country in the political process. Some of them are already finding alternative means to influence the political process. One example is the positive role played by *Combatants for Peace*⁹. Former combatants from both sides, Palestinian resistance fighters and Israeli soldiers, work together to find the means to end occupation in order to achieve peace and coexistence.

⁷ See article: *L'ennemi public numéro un est fatigué*, by Benjamin Barthe, in Le Monde (France), April 6, 2007; [http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-](http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=983413)

[bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=983413](http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/acheter.cgi?offre=ARCHIVES&type_item=ART_ARCH_30J&objet_id=983413)
And the documentary *Après Arafat: le pouvoir des rebelles armés*, by Paul Moreira and Daniel Lainé, Lundi Investigation, Canal + (France); <http://www.canalplus.fr/index.php?pid=61&rid=1431>

⁸ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Youth Survey, December 2003.

⁹ www.combatantsforpeace.org

A STRUCTURAL RESPONSE TO EMPOWER YOUTH

Most donor countries set up youth programmes aiming at empowering youth through scholarships, training programmes and capacity building. There are interesting proposals such as the establishment of a High School of Administration, or of an institute to train our future diplomats. These are all valuable contributions.

Nevertheless, what is really needed is far beyond just another youth programme, or another scholarship. What is crucial is to provide our youth with perspectives for a brighter future. What is needed is to set the basis for sustainable social and economic development so that choosing to stay in Palestine would not be perceived as a sacrifice but as an opportunity. What is vital is to make this soil fertile for dreams again.

For young people to influence policy making they must be organized. They need a structure able to represent them and to ensure their voice is heard. This structure must unite Palestinian youth. We need this unity, not only between Palestinians abroad and inside Palestine, but also within Palestine. Our responsibility is to ensure that the fragmentation of Palestinian land by the occupying power, and the fact that we are, in our majority, a nation of refugees disseminated throughout the world, does not undermine our unity and our ability to find a common vision in spite of the differences of circumstances and our political diversity

③ Establishing a Consultative Committee on Youth Affairs (CCYA)

▪ Composition

This consultative committee must ensure the representation of Young Palestinians from outside and inside Palestine, those who work in NGOs and those working in the political field. It must reflect our political diversity. Finally it must include both students and young professionals. All these elements will ensure the necessary balance between the different components of our society, and their equitable representation.

The 4 pillars

• Students

Two entities will ensure representation of both students in Palestine and abroad: the students' councils of the different Palestinian Universities, and the national branches of the General Union of Palestine Students abroad.

I have already spoken about the students' council. They will allow both to ensure representation of political groups and non-political organizations.

The GUPS was one of the first institutions to represent Palestinians, regardless of their political affiliation. Its presence through branches all over the world allowed Palestinian students, wherever they were, to participate in the national struggle, have a political role, preserve the cultural heritage, help other students. Means must be given to the GUPS to develop itself democratically¹⁰. The national branches of the GUPS outside Palestine will thus ensure the representation of Palestinian Students abroad.

¹⁰ There are some experiences of reconstruction of the GUPS as in Chile, England and France. I began working within the GUPS France in 2002 and presided it in 2006.

- Young Professionals

Young professionals will contribute through their experience to this new structure. They also have to organize themselves within a network before holding elections. This will allow doctors, businessmen, journalists, engineers, etc, to join this structure. There are already attempts to create such networks, like the *Young Entrepreneurs Palestine (YEP)*¹¹. Young Palestinians abroad wishing to join should be also able to do so. The knowledge of young professionals on needed economic reforms, the employment market and on the post-studies challenges will be valuable.

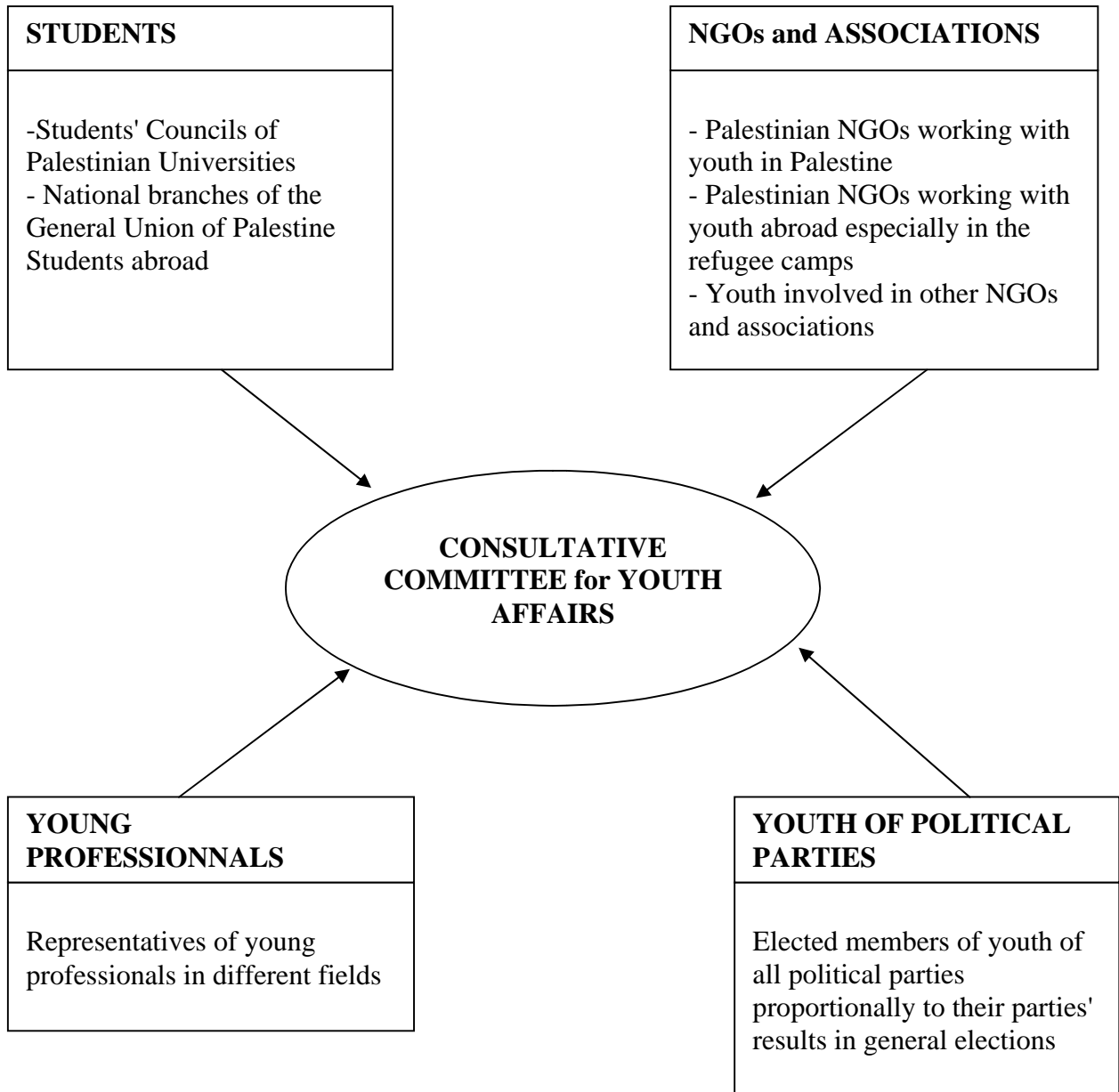
- NGOs and Associations working with youth

There are Palestinian NGOs, in Palestine and abroad, working with youth. A network regrouping them should be established. This network would be a first step before they hold elections to choose their representatives within the CCYA. This should lead to a renewed interest in youth as NGOs concentrate mostly on children. It is also important to allow young Palestinians working in NGOs and associations not working on youth to have a certain number of seats within the consultative committee.

- Youth of political Parties

All political parties have to be represented, thus respecting all the tendencies in our society and ensure that they can debate and exchange in a democratic manner. The youth of political parties are already elected and therefore representative. To ensure respect for their weight in Palestine, they will be represented in the CCYA proportionally to their parties' result in the last general elections.

¹¹ <http://www.yep.ps/>



- **Competences**

The CCYA will be in charge of making proposals such as the ones I proposed in this paper and ensuring the follow up of their implementation. It would have competence on all issues of concern for young Palestinians. It will evaluate existing policies and propose new ones. It will be able to propose legislation and amendments on existing legislation. This committee will have the ability to address both the Palestinian Legislative Council and the Palestinian National Council, to meet with the executive, and to hold public meetings. It will also be given means to propose and implement initiatives to empower youth.

Its competence in the field of education is evident. It is important to associate young Palestinians in the definition and implementation of educational reforms and the shaping of programmes. The CCYA will be able to play a role in finding and attributing scholarships

thus allowing more transparency in their attribution and ensuring equal opportunities especially for refugees who do not have access today to most scholarships.

The CCYA will also have competence on other issues not exclusively related to youth to ensure that youth are not forgotten: employment, institutional reforms, economic reforms, social measures, democratic reforms...

- Functioning

A commission will be created in each field in which all 4 pillars will be represented by those people with most knowledge in that particular field. There can be as many commissions as necessary (education, institutional reforms, employment,...). Once the commission has studied and evaluated the proposals, the texts or initiatives will be submitted to the whole committee.

The Consultative Committee on Youth Affairs is a structure allowing to modernize our institutions and inject new policies on youth. It will bring a new breath to our political life and ensure the involvement of youth in reforms and allow them to have a say in their own future.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes a strategy for youth to be more involved both in the destiny of their country and in their own destiny. It gives some proposals to ensure that the sense of citizenship that is undeniable within our nation finds concrete outcomes. It also proposes a structure capable not only to ensure the follow-up of the implementation of these proposals but also to be a force of initiative. This structure will enable youth to propose and influence reforms. It will allow them to hold the decision makers accountable thus ensuring democracy and good governance.

It is important to have our own strategy, to evaluate our own policies, to exercise self-criticism. It is important for youth to become increasingly involved and influential in the political and social field. The ultimate goal is to allow our youth to contribute in defining our future.

Nevertheless, for this future to be really possible this youth, as our entire people, needs the occupation to end. It needs a state to achieve its legitimate aspiration to independence. It needs to find prospects. Instead of that, this generation is the generation of the wall, the generation that is witnessing the methodical destruction of any perspective of a Palestinian state, the generation of dislocations and new Diasporas. Leaving an entire population and within it a whole generation in despair cannot but produce more violence, more anger, more hatred. The Palestinian people were able, in very difficult circumstances, to build a living democracy, with its successes and shortcomings. This democracy is a model for the region. However, the fact that our people has the feeling that his democracy is not respected, that their vote can not influence their future, will undermine all that we have built and compromise what we could build.

The time has come to face the roots of the conflict. I cannot but share the idea of education for peace but I also support education in peace. All programmes that ensure education for peace and promote dialogue will not prevent hatred as long as there is an ongoing occupation, a father in prison, an assassinated son, a mother in mourning, a child made orphan. All the capacity and institutional building is meaningless, as long as our institutions are attacked and undermined.

The Palestinian people seek freedom, justice, peace and coexistence. There can be no peace without freedom and justice. There cannot be coexistence if our existence, the existence of our state, is not guaranteed. Empowering our youth is the only means to preserve our cause and our rights thus enabling ourselves to face increasing challenges. It is our responsibility to ensure that our people can firmly hold, once again, the reigns of its destiny.