

YOUTH IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

Facing Huge Challenges During a Critical Period



Examining the important linkages between wellbeing and living a healthy and productive life, the policy paper answers; How do Palestinian youth define and assess their wellbeing? What are the main determinants of youth wellbeing? And, what can be done to improve the wellbeing of Palestinian youth? Understanding the needs of youth and the factors that determine their wellbeing are important in formulating policies that invest in young people. This policy brief is derived from an in-depth multi-level and interdisciplinary study that analyses the state of the youth in the occupied Palestinian territory.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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INTRODUCTION

Youth account for nearly one-sixth of the world's population, and the proportion of young people is expected to increase over the coming decades. This population is important, not only because it constitutes a significant and growing proportion of the global population but also because youth represent the future of society and can play an important role in social, political, and economic development, both nationally and globally.¹ On a personal level, this period of a person's life represents an important transitional phase that is often characterized by changes in social roles and responsibilities, paving the way for independence.² Importantly, at present many young people face significant internal and external challenges and stressors, often as a result of broader structural factors.³

The challenges that youth face and the opportunities they are offered are key in determining the future direction of any society, and the UN Population Division considers inadequate investment in human capital and unemployment among youth to be critical challenges in many countries. Understanding the needs of youth and the factors that determine their wellbeing⁴ are important in formulating policies that invest in young people.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), youth between the ages of 15 and 29 constitute roughly one-third of the population.⁵ Despite their importance, Palestinian youth face significant difficulties and obstacles, including high rates of unemployment, poor living conditions, and heightened insecurity stemming from the Israeli military occupation.⁶ Furthermore, within Palestinian society, youth are marginalized and excluded from full participation in public and political life.⁷ They also face increasing social pressures caused by conservatism, patriarchal norms, gender discrimination, and unequal distribution of social and political power.⁸ These challenges shape the environment in which Palestinian youth live and through which they navigate, and are likely to have adverse impacts on their wellbeing. Looking at the important linkages between wellbeing and the ability of youth to live a healthy and productive life, this research study – which focused more narrowly on the 18–29 age group – is guided by the following questions:⁹

- How do Palestinian youth define and assess their wellbeing?
- What are the main determinants of wellbeing for Palestinian youth?
- What can be done to improve the wellbeing of Palestinian youth?

HOW DO PALESTINIAN YOUTH DEFINE AND ASSESS THEIR WELLBEING?

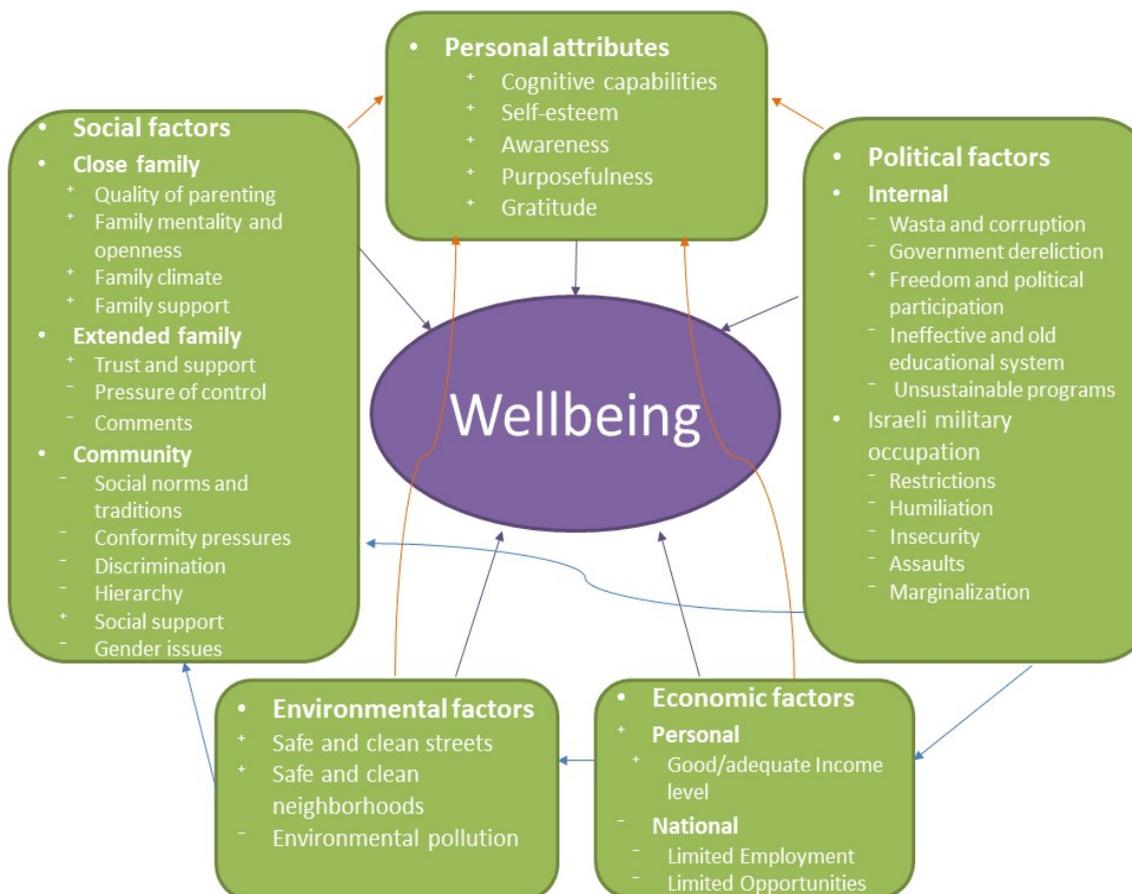
The qualitative findings of this study reveal that Palestinian youth in general have a good conceptual understanding of the meaning of wellbeing, which is often very close to the various definitions found in the literature on this topic. Young Palestinians' definitions of wellbeing revolve around the interactions between concepts of both physical and psychological health, such as energy, strength, peace of mind, tranquillity, vitality, stability, comfort, satisfaction, and happiness. One young person from Jerusalem described wellbeing as 'peace of mind and psychological, social, and economic comfort'. Another participant from Rafah described it as 'happiness, satisfaction, and everything beautiful'.

Overall, the young people who participated in the qualitative part of this study felt that their wellbeing was at a lower level than that of youth globally, but that it was better than that of youth in some Arab countries, especially those experiencing conflicts (e.g. Syria and Iraq) and political strife (e.g. Egypt). The survey part of the study found that Palestinian youth have a mean wellbeing score of just under 59 points out of 100, which indicates that they have low to average levels of wellbeing. What is striking, however, is that, based on the WHO criteria, nearly **36% of Palestinian youth have low wellbeing**,¹⁰ and about **10% are in the extremely low wellbeing range, placing them at greater risk of mental illness**.

WHAT ARE THE KEY DETERMINANTS OF WELLBEING AMONG PALESTINIAN YOUTH?

The research team divided the determinants of youth wellbeing, based on the results of the statistical analysis, into the social dimension, including family and broader social community; contextual factors, consisting of political, economic, and environmental dimensions; and finally personal factors, which interact with all of the other determinants. There were variations among youth in terms of the importance of each determinant for their wellbeing, but almost all reported that the interactions of these determinants with one another affected their wellbeing. Figure 1 illustrates these determinants of wellbeing and their interactions.

Figure 1: The determinants of wellbeing and their interactions



SOCIAL FACTORS

Family support, positive family environment, and trust in family and community are crucial for wellbeing.

'If a young person passes through the childhood period with good-quality upbringing and has gained life skills, she/he will grow in wellbeing.' — Young woman from Hebron

'Upbringing is the foundation, the first point'. — Young man from Jerusalem

The family environment was considered by youth to be one of the most important determinants of wellbeing. For young people, having a good relationship and trust with their parents and other family members was key to their wellbeing, in addition to having a high degree of freedom, independence, and appreciation. The **extended family** was also reported to have a strong influence: either a **positive influence** through positive relationships, trust, and support or a **negative influence** through direct interfering, negative comments, or pressure on the young person or their close family, which might lead to restrictions, pressures, and

stress for youth, especially young women. While this finding is not surprising, young people reported that a negative home environment can have a huge impact on their wellbeing, especially as the home is supposed to be a 'haven' that supports youth and builds their personality and capacity to deal with broader challenges and stressors.

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Community traditions, as a source of control, restrictions, and demands, have a negative effect on wellbeing.

One young woman from a village in the north of the West Bank stated: 'Everything you hear from the community affects you, whether positive or negative.' Indeed, many young people reported the importance of social support and of having positive relationships with the community. However, pressures exerted by traditional norms can have a significant negative influence on the wellbeing of youth. This is particularly the case in conservative communities, which young people characterized as being judgmental, demanding, gossipy, and controlling, and which exert a considerable amount of pressure on youth and reduce their space for freedom and consequently have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing.

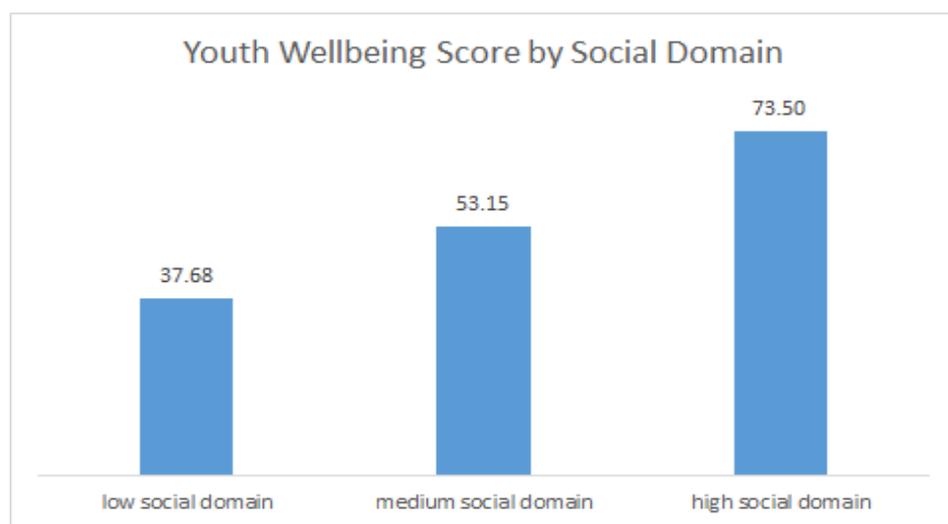
What is important to highlight here, in both the family and community contexts, is that the key issue for youth is an **open and supportive environment** that provides them with a reasonable degree of **freedom**.

Youth who report high levels of personal freedom and trust in their communities, and whose opinions are taken seriously by their families, have high levels of wellbeing.

The findings from the focus group discussions (FGDs) confirmed those of the survey. Figure 2 shows the relationship between youth wellbeing (score out of 100) and the social domain, which includes trust and freedom in the family and the community and a feeling that their opinions are taken seriously within the family.¹¹ If we compare youth who have similar characteristics apart from the social domain, we can see that

higher scores on the social domain are associated with a considerable increase in wellbeing. Youth with the lowest scores on the social domain questions had an average wellbeing score of about 38, placing them well below the WHO cut-off point of 50 for low wellbeing. In contrast, youth with the highest possible scores in this domain had an average wellbeing score of around 74, which indicates moderate to high wellbeing. There is a very big difference in the scores, and it highlights the importance of positive social relations for good wellbeing.

Figure 2: Youth wellbeing score by social domain



The ongoing Israeli occupation, mobility restrictions, humiliation, feelings of insecurity and instability, siege conditions, and closures all have negative effects on youth wellbeing.

'The Israeli military occupation doesn't want Palestinian youth to be aware, because if you are aware you will say no to everything.'

'Our lives are not stable, and we can't plan for the future [due to the political situation].' —Young man from Jerusalem

'We don't have any freedom because of the occupation. It doesn't only affect our wellbeing, but our whole life.' —Young woman from Bethlehem

'I am 28 years old, and I visited Nablus for the first time only last month. Our freedom of movement is totally restricted by the occupation. I have never visited the sea, although it is two hours away from here!'—Young man from a village northwest of Jerusalem

'We can say that we live in a big prison.' — Another young man from the same group

From the quotes above, it is clear that participants in the focus groups felt strongly about the Israeli occupation and its direct effects on their wellbeing and their lives in general. In particular, they mentioned the restrictions on mobility imposed by the Israeli occupation, along with feelings of humiliation and marginalization, and they also expressed feelings of insecurity and instability. The restrictions imposed on the Palestinian population further limit the space for youth to participate and to realize their potential. Gazan youth in particular reported the massive effect of the blockade and closure on their daily lives, and also in terms of shrinking opportunities for their future. These conditions are also increasing the sense of insecurity and uncertainty among youth, which has been shown to have negative effects on health, including mental health. These results are not surprising, but they make clearer the link between the Israeli occupation and youth wellbeing, either directly or through its interaction with other determinants of wellbeing.

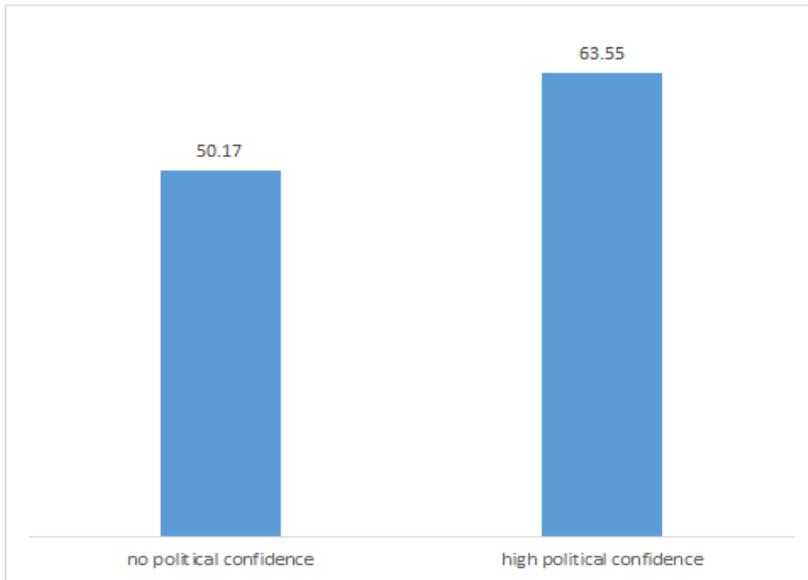
Internal political repression, youth exclusion and marginalization, lack of freedom, *Wasta* (nepotism), and corruption have negative impacts on youth wellbeing.

'The reality we live in is one where politics can lead you to be imprisoned, meaning it can cause problems, for example, if you are in a [political] party or say anything that is different from the others [the mainstream]. This might expose you to a problem even if you do not participate actively in the party; even expressing a political opinion in public or on social media can cause problems. For example, I am a caricature artist but because I was arrested, I do not draw any political caricatures [anymore].' —Young man from village in northwest Jerusalem

'We have a problem here: whether in health, education or anything, there is something called wasta.' —Young woman from village in the north of the West Bank

Political confidence is also an important determinant of wellbeing, as reflected in the quotes above. According to the survey, having no political confidence decreases the wellbeing score for youth by 13.4 points, compared with youth who have high levels of political confidence (all other factors being equal for both categories). Figure 3 illustrates the effect of internal political confidence¹² on youth wellbeing. Political confidence was assessed on three measures: satisfaction with government efforts to provide employment opportunities for youth; confidence in institutions;¹³ and youth perceptions of the importance/significance of youth in various institutions.¹⁴

Figure 3: Wellbeing score by political confidence



The FGDs confirmed the statistical results. Many participants expressed their frustration at the lack of space available to participate politically and at the restrictions on political freedoms and increasing levels of political oppression. This was true for youth both in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. Disappointment with public institutions was mentioned frequently by focus group participants. This included the perceived prevalence of *wasta* (nepotism) and corruption in public institutions, which also affected work opportunities for youth. Many participants also expressed their disappointment with the education system, which appears not to teach much about life skills, such as problem solving, self-confidence, and critical thinking. This is in line with the statistical findings on a lack of confidence in government and political institutions.

Difficult economic conditions, unemployment, social inequality, inability to meet basic needs, insufficient incomes, and the rising cost of living have negative effects on youth wellbeing.

Difficult economic conditions, and especially unemployment, were considered to have a negative impact on youth wellbeing. *Wasta*, corruption, and the Israeli occupation impose serious strains on the economy and are the main factors leading to unemployment, according to respondents. Here, the link between economic and political conditions was considered to be important.

One young man from Hebron said: 'We want to talk about youth, but why is it that youth finish university and there are no jobs? It's known, in Hebron there are about 3,000¹⁵ people and they employ about 40, so that leaves 2,960 people unemployed – where will they go? They'll go get married so they can get a permit and they go to work in Israel and find

themselves in debt for 10 years into the future. This is not fair, and we see the consequences for society as a whole.'

An inability to meet basic needs, even if a young person was employed, was also seen as a factor having a negative impact on the wellbeing of youth, as incomes in general do not keep pace with increasing prices. Youth also noted that social inequalities are increasing, and people who have money have greater ability to meet their needs and are usually treated better.

A young man from a village northwest of Jerusalem said: 'Securing everyday basic needs [food, clothes, etc.] is a problem. What kind of a job should you get to have enough salary to meet your needs? The individual income that one earns compared to life expenses is a real disaster!'

Personal resources are important for wellbeing.

The sections above outline the key determinants of wellbeing among youth. In the FGDs, participants also highlighted important personal attributes that they believed enhanced a person's capacity to endure and overcome contextual adversities (e.g. cognitive capabilities, self-esteem, awareness, purposefulness, gratitude). These attributes are affected by all the factors and contexts described above. They give youth a sense of control and agency in dealing with their environment, help to relieve the stress of daily life and challenging or unsupportive circumstances, and can be built upon with the development of life skills and stress management techniques, to eventually produce high levels of wellbeing. What is also different here from the other domains is that, unlike other determinants, personal traits and resources are seen to affect and also be affected by wellbeing. So, while having strong reserves of personal resources can help to improve wellbeing, having good wellbeing was also seen to be protective of youth and helpful in preventing poor health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy brief emphasizes factors that are reported by youth to be very important for improving wellbeing, and which the research team believes are important to address. These factors either affect youth wellbeing or are considered to be important protective factors (such as assets or resources) that play an important role in enabling young people to cope with contextual adversities that are difficult to address.

There are **four major contexts or levels of action** – relating to neighbourhood and community, family, institutions, and personal factors – which this policy brief recommends for all policy makers and civic leaders, based on the findings of the study.

Neighbourhood and community

- Policy makers in all sectors, including universities, should collaborate to raise awareness and secure resources to educate people and decision makers about wellbeing and its importance, and also its socio-political determinants, through workshops, public events, and media and social media campaigns.
- The government, in collaboration with communities and municipalities, should create more safe and well-managed spaces for youth – such as parks, sport clubs, museums, theatres, cultural centres, and so on – to practise recreational, physical, and cultural activities. Such spaces encourage productive leisure time, positive emotions, and an active and engaged lifestyle, and also provide opportunities for young people to improve their talents and learn new skills, to interact and make friends, and to release negative energy.
- Local governments should encourage and support the social and political participation of youth to ensure better representation and therefore advocacy for the interests and needs of youth.
- Civil society and media organizations should facilitate social platforms for youth that target social problems and misconceptions that adversely affect their wellbeing, and should contest entrenched patriarchal norms, social control and restrictions, and inequitable gender relations by promoting openness, acceptance, freedom, and respect.

Family

- Governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should establish programs that increase awareness about the needs of youth and how to create more supportive home environments.
- Awareness-raising campaigns should also work to target parents and the community more broadly in order to create a more supportive and encouraging environment for youth.

Institutions

- The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with local organizations and experts, should reform and develop the education system to include life skills such as problem solving, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and critical thinking.
- Training activities should be conducted for school teachers and counsellors, focusing on extracurricular activities for students and on how to provide a more innovative and supportive environment for youth.
- Efforts should be made to strengthen collaboration and the exchange of information between the education system and other sectors such as the labour market and the agricultural and industrial sectors. This should include joint programs to communicate the needs, resources, and opportunities that exist between all sectors to better manage and reduce unemployment and to create more economic opportunities.

- The government – specifically the ministries of labour and education – should expand vocational training programs and work to increase their acceptability as an alternative to traditional education for some youth.
- Psychosocial services within the Ministry of Health should be expanded to better address psychosocial health needs.
- The government should introduce programs that strengthen the social and financial capital of youth, such as employment and social security and welfare policies, especially policies aimed at reducing inequality and ensuring fair and equal access to resources and opportunities for youth and their families. The government should also take action against nepotism (*wasta*) and corruption and make jobs available based on qualifications and competition.
- Programs for youth with disabilities should be expanded, focusing on the integration of young people with disabilities into schools and universities, public and private workplaces, and CSOs.
- Local and international advocacy organizations should be created and supported to defend youth from the violations of the Israeli military occupation, to ensure that their voices and needs are translated into action against these violations, and eventually to help end the occupation. Advocacy activities should highlight the negative consequences of the occupation on the health and wellbeing of the Palestinian population.

Personal

- The education system, in addition to all other sectors, should introduce individually oriented programs, such as skills building/development and life skills, to support youth to cultivate strong and positive personal characteristics that will enable them to improve their wellbeing and their resilience to contextual factors that reduce wellbeing.
- Social, psychological, and legal services nationwide should be strengthened for all marginalized individuals and families in need of support and advocacy (e.g. youth in extreme poverty, sexually abused youth, those facing problems with drug addiction, etc.).

NOTES

1 N. Goldin. (2014). *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

<https://www.iyfnet.org/sites/default/files/library/globalyouthwellbeingindex.pdf>

2 J.J. Arnett, R. Žukauskienė, and K. Sugimura. (2014). *The new life stage of emerging adulthood at ages 18–29 years: implications for mental health*. *The Lancet Psychiatry* 1(7), 569-576.

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<https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2F0003-066X.55.5.469>

3 N. Goldin. (2014). *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index*, op. cit.; J.J. Arnett, R.

Žukauskienė, and K. Sugimura. (2014). *The new life stage of emerging adulthood at ages 18–29 years*, op. cit.

4 Wellbeing is a multifaceted, culturally and contextually sensitive concept and one that has different definitions and connotations. Generally, it means feeling and functioning well. The WHO-5 Well-Being Index, which was used for the quantitative survey, covers the concepts of positive mood, vitality, and general interests.

5 W. Abu Fasheh. (2013). *The Status of Youth in Palestine*. Sharek Youth Forum.

6 Ibid.; R. Giacaman, Y. Rabaia, V. Nguyen-Gillham, R. Batniji, R.-L. Punamäki, and D. Summerfield. (2011). *Mental health, social distress and political oppression: The case of the occupied Palestinian territory*. *Global Public Health* 6(5), 547-559; R. Giacaman, H.S. Shannon, H. Saab, N. Arya, and W. Boyce.

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7 Transparency International. (2015). *Asset Declarations in Palestine: Illicit Enrichment and Conflicts of Interest of Public Officials*.

https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2016_AssetDeclarationsInPalestine_EN.pdf

8 W. Abu Fasheh. (2013). *The Status of Youth in Palestine*, op. cit.

9 The research team, from the Institute of Community and Public Health (ICPH) at Birzeit University, used both quantitative and qualitative methods for this study. The quantitative part is based on a secondary statistical analysis of data collected from young people aged 18–29 years from the West Bank and Gaza Strip (n=1,353). For the qualitative part, the team conducted 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth of the same age group from across the OPT.

10 WHO considers a score below 50 to indicate low wellbeing and one below 28 to be very low, possibly indicating poor mental health.

11 Low = youth perceive that their opinions are not important in the family; no social trust and no freedom.

Medium = youth perceive that their opinions are important in the family; mid-range trust and freedom.

High = youth perceive that their opinions are important in the family; high trust and freedom.

12 Unfortunately, the survey did not include any questions on the Israeli occupation, which the qualitative findings indicate is an important dimension of the political domain.

13 This includes eight types of institution: security forces, police, courts, government, local councils/municipalities, political parties, parliament, and public civil services.

14 Voluntary organizations, political parties, local community, and whether political leaders took youth into consideration.

15 This number was used by the participant to illustrate his point.

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