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The Impact of Political Fragmentation and Social Polarization on the People's Agency for Change

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Executive Summary:

“The Impact of Political Fragmentation and Social Polarization on the People’s Agency for Change”

“The Impact of Political Fragmentation and Social Polarization on the People’s Agency for Change” explores the causes and repercussions of fragmentation and polarization on youths’ presence in the public sphere and their ability to bring about change in the Palestinian society. The research is divided into four chapters. The first chapter entails an introduction and theoretical framework. The second chapter addresses divisions: forms and causes, and is divided into two sections: the first of which discusses forms of divisions, while the second section examines the causes of social and political divisions among young people in Palestinian society. The third chapter focuses on youth and the question of change: factors, effects, and mechanisms of change, and is divided into two sections. The first section explores the factors and reasons for the decline in the role of youth in the process of change, while the second section discusses mechanisms and tools for enhancing youth participation in the process of change. The fourth chapter presents the results, interventions, recommendations, and references.

The research addresses the reality of Palestinian youth, characterized by their exclusion from the public sphere. Several factors contributed to this situation, including political division, societal culture, poor economic conditions, and the presence of the occupation. These factors have made youth feel anxious about their future, rendering them helpless and diminishing their hope for the ability to bring about the change required, desired, and entrusted to them in the future.

The research aims to highlight the political and social divisions that prevent youth from participating in the process of change, whether social or political. It also addresses many significant and influential factors in enhancing youths’ role and presence in society, especially the tools and mechanisms that would enhance their presence in the process of political and social change. The aim is to make youth active and engaged participants in public affairs and to influence decision-makers to prioritize youth issues, their needs, and their role in society. Additionally, the research highlights the obstacles and reasons preventing youth from participating in the process of political and social change in Palestinian society.

The importance of this research lies in researching and revealing the impact of political, social, factional, tribal, and regional divisions on the ability of youth to bring about change in society. It also aims to uncover the political, legal, social, cultural, and economic factors that hinder youths’ participation in the process of change, shedding light on the participation of women and youth in this process. The research examines the impact of shrinking civic spaces on their participation in the desired change and analyzes the polarization occurring between different social groups in Palestinian society. Ultimately, it aims to develop a set of interventions and recommendations to enhance their participation in the change process. This preliminary

exploratory research primarily relied on the descriptive, analytical, and historical methods, as well as the qualitative research method through content analysis and in-depth interviews. It covered the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, focusing on the period from 2007, the year the division began, until October 1st, 2023.

The research also addresses in detail the reality of young people in Palestinian society and the prevailing traditional view of them as lacking experience and competence, along with a discriminatory perspective based on gender in the case of women. In general, Palestinian culture, age, and gender are still considered basic indicators of confidence. This marginalization intersects with the lack of representation in senior official positions, resulting in a significant gap between representation and demography. The challenges faced by young people of both sexes contribute to a decline in their general sense of citizenship and belonging, an increase in the desire to migrate, and a rise in violence and societal disintegration, posing a threat to civil peace. The division has had serious social consequences, widening the gap between social classes. This has led to increased fragmentation and tension within society, opening the way for rumors that could affect civil peace and potentially cause internal conflicts. It has resulted in more societal division both vertically and horizontally, fostering rivalry between groups within society. This fragmentation has negatively impacted the comprehensive national identity and shared values, particularly the values of citizenship and belonging. It poses a fundamental threat to the Palestinian people's access to their right to self-determination and their legitimate national rights to end the occupation and establish an independent Palestinian state on their national soil.

The research identifies the significant role of political division in undermining the youth's involvement in the process of change, a situation that has long plagued Palestinian society, particularly since before 2007. The deep-seated political and intellectual differences between the Fatah and Hamas movements have cast a pervasive shadow over all aspects of Palestinian life, notably in social, political, and national spheres. The emergence of political Islam movements in Palestinian politics, particularly within the Palestinian student movement and the Palestinian Legislative Council, increased tensions between supporters of the two movements. Even prisons were not spared from this division, deepening social fragmentation that negatively impacted the social fabric and civil peace. Consequently, this division affected youth participation in public affairs and decision-making processes, intensifying issues like unemployment, poverty, and hardship. It also significantly bolstered partisan fanaticism, a dangerous phenomenon that has permeated Palestinian society. The prevailing atmosphere of partisan and organizational mobilization within the Palestinian Authority, despite its denial, has further hindered the cultivation of a culture of dialogue and political partnership among Palestinian factions. This lack of dialogue and political partnership has had a detrimental effect on the youth's reality and their ability to effect meaningful change in society.

The research revealed that the low participation of young people in public affairs and political life stems from several factors. These include young people's preoccupation with their individual issues and concerns, a pervasive sense of frustration

among the younger generation, and the prevalence of clientelist practices within the Palestinian political system established after Oslo. This system lacks social justice and equal opportunities, further worsened by the political division that has disrupted the electoral process at both the presidential and parliamentary levels. Moreover, the research highlighted the weak electoral culture and limited experience in establishing political systems, building institutions, and practicing democratic processes. Despite young people constituting a large percentage of Palestinian society, there remains a risk that future elections may simply re-elect the same traditional figures, deepening the marginalization and alienation of youth within Palestinian society. To address this issue, it is crucial to strengthen the presence of youth and women in political participation, programs, and electoral lists. Civilian oversight and community accountability must also be emphasized in future electoral processes to ensure meaningful change and inclusivity.

The research emphasized that building a democratic society founded on principles like equality, citizenship, social justice, good governance, and a politically legitimate system requires enabling youth to access decision-making positions and processes. Their active participation in administrative and political reform, public policy making, and the necessary processes of change is crucial. This is not only because these policies directly affect them as the most populous demographic group, but also because empowering them to lead through practice and experience is essential. Recognizing them as competent individuals to rely on is key. Therefore, the significance of youths' political participation in the electoral process emerges as the primary gateway to enhancing their role in public affairs and realizing the desired societal change.

The research highlighted that enhancing and expanding youths' participation in public affairs cultivates a culture of citizenship encompassing both rights and duties. This, in turn, elevates the status and presence of youth in society, strengthens their connection to national issues over individual interests, and catalyzes profound changes across social, economic, cultural, and political structures, advancing comprehensive development. By harnessing youths' energies in community development, it recognizes that community progress requires the engagement of all demographics, including youth. To achieve this, a series of measures are necessary to enhance values of citizenship and belonging among young people. These include educating them about the importance of homeland belonging and fostering a strong connection to its cultural values and heritage. It involves enhancing their cultural identity, promoting volunteerism and social work values, encouraging participation in national events, honoring the role of martyrs, prisoners, wounded, and missing individuals, and rejecting regionalism, political, organizational, and religious fanaticism. Furthermore, it entails ensuring that every citizen fulfills his/her assigned role responsibly, promoting integrity and transparency, combating corruption, and preserving public property. It emphasizes values of tolerance, love, respect, and acceptance of diversity, while reinforcing authentic Palestinian values, customs, and traditions. It also involves raising awareness about societal issues, instilling respect for the rule of law, combating hate speech and intolerance, and empowering young people to influence decision-making processes to prioritize their needs and contribute significantly to their local communities. Educating young people about their

constitutional and legal rights, promoting accountability, transparency, and openness, and changing negative perceptions about participation through a social movement that upholds these principles are also crucial aspects of this transformative process.

The research concluded with several key findings. It highlighted the absence of influential young figures serving as role models due to a lack of political will for real reform in the Palestinian political system, hindering youth representation and participation. This has widened the generational gap in Palestinian society, with the elderly maintaining control over leadership positions in influential parties and institutions, and being reluctant to provide young people with meaningful opportunities for participation. Consequently, this has bred feelings of despair and a loss of confidence in the Palestinian political system. Furthermore, the research noted the misuse of social media to fuel political disputes and spread hate speech instead of supporting and enhancing youths' political participation and knowledge exchange. This misuse has intensified fragmentation and division among young people, further deepening political and social divisions in Palestinian society. Additionally, low levels of political awareness and a lack of political and social upbringing have contributed to reduced positive youth participation in political and social life, leading many to abstain from active involvement in the divisive Palestinian political landscape. A prevailing sense of frustration and despair among the youth has diminished their belief in their ability to effect the desired change, prompting thoughts of emigration and increasing instances of violence and rejection among the youth sector. This is intensified by high crime rates impacting civil peace and a decline in youths' confidence in Palestinian political systems, non-governmental institutions, political parties, and civil formations. There is also noted absence of a clear media vision and strategy regarding youth issues, failing to adopt their concerns and support their effective participation in the necessary social and political changes.

Based on the conclusions, several recommendations were made for stakeholders, officials, and specialists in both official and private institutions. These recommendations emphasize the implementation of a comprehensive national policy for youth, ensuring their involvement in decision-making processes, and advocating for their representation in all official and representative institutions, political parties, and academic positions, particularly within PLO institutions, such as the National Council and the Executive Committee. Furthermore, the recommendations suggest the need to amend laws, regulations, and policies to align with the aspirations and ambitions of young people, recognizing their pioneering role in society. Plans and programs should be developed to address the various challenges faced by young people, including strategies to combat feelings of alienation, negativity, and helplessness in effecting change. It is essential to adopt a holistic strategy that empowers young people economically, socially, and intellectually, reinstating their presence and leveraging it to enhance their role in public life. This strategy should involve all political, social, cultural, official, and civil components to ensure comprehensive support for young people. However, the effectiveness of these measures ultimately depends on the convictions of decision-makers and, most importantly, the presence of political will.