

Palestinian Youth and Political Parties:

A pioneering engagement in political parties
to fear and disappointment

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Sharek Youth Forum is a nongovernmental, nonprofit, and nonpartisan Palestinian youth organization led by youth. It works to create positive social change by empowering environments for young people to become active participants in all sectors of civil society and in the development of their communities.

The Views and opinions of the contributors not necessarily state or reflect the opinion of Sharek Youth Forum.

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Introduction:

Sharek Youth Forum is furthering its efforts in raising youth issues for community debate, and seeking to build programs, projects and policies that reflect youth's needs and interests, taking into consideration the available potentials and priorities of society. Sharek has extensive cumulative experience from years of action in various youth-related fields, programs, services, research, lobbying and advocacy. Sharek will aim at presenting one or more youth issues in the media every month, where the issue(s) will undergo a comprehensive discussion with the involvement of all relevant parties.

Sharek envisages using **two mechanisms** to select these youth issues: the **first** is to encourage young people to identify all priority issues, which they perceive as important to be subjected to a broad community-based discussion in preparation for the development of related national policies. The **second** is to refer to the outcomes and findings of Sharek's activities, projects and studies, particularly in the past year, in order to identify issues of major concern.

The following notes need to be taken into consideration:

- The order of presenting the issues does not necessarily reflect any importance over the other issues, but is rather a result of purely logistical considerations.
- The discussion of a youth-related issue with relevant parties is aimed at making youth voices heard by decision-makers, while exploring the positions of these parties from each one of these issues and their willingness to adopt the perspective of young people themselves in addressing them.
- The perspective in which youth issues will be raised does not reflect the opinions of Sharek or its staff, but reflects the overall trends among the Palestinian youth. Nevertheless, we recognize and respect all individual differences among young people. Sharek's perception of a raised perspective as reflecting a general trend is based on professional and objective grounds, since the Forum's vision and work mechanisms seek to reach all segments in the youth sector (considering variations in terms of gender, locality, educational level, age, social class, region, etc).

- Sharek hopes that the outputs of this debate will provide an interactive (qualitative) information support that would provide the grounds for creating a comprehensive vision and policy direction for creatively addressing youth issues at the level of decisions, resources, legislations and programs.
- Any criticism youth may address to a certain situation or an institution should be taken positively. In fact, criticism made by youth expresses how much concern they show about correcting shortcomings. It is important to reach a community-wide and institutional recognition of the fact that what is good for youth is, by necessity, good for the society as a whole. Youth are the fabric of the present and the mainstay for the future.



Session One: Palestinian Youth and Political Parties:

Palestinian youth: from a pioneering engagement in political parties to fear and disappointment

Palestinian youth have played a pioneering role in shouldering the burdens of the Palestinian national struggle. Youth initiatives in shouldering national and social responsibilities have been a key factor in maintaining national identity and the emergence of the Palestinian national movement and its political forces. Therefore, young people have been the most exposed to political and military violence, with many having been killed, injured, detained, tortured and deported. With the establishment of NGOs and Palestinian Authority (PA) institutions and the decline in the role of political organizations, youth have also become more active in institutional work, although institutional practices often failed to consider or invest in youth potentials in an optimal way.

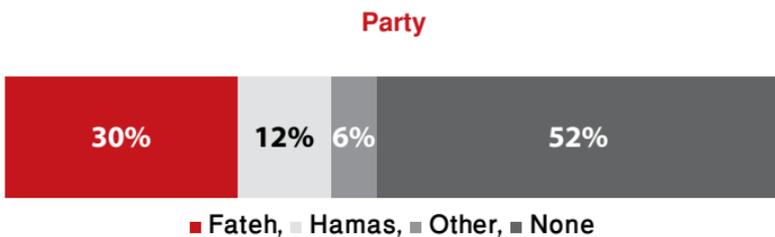
Therefore, the Palestinian youth are among the most politicized youth in the world, with each party or “faction” having a youth organization. Elections to student councils are monitored by political groups as indicators of the general trends of the political situation in the country. Youth voting rates also remain high and many young people continue to demonstrate daily – taking great personal risk – against the Israeli occupation.

Palestinian youth are fully aware of the political forces that affect their lives, but a sense of disappointment with Palestinian political parties is rising among the majority of youth, up to the degree of fear of dealing with these parties. This represents a new trend among Palestinian youth. When the main driving force for political activism has been struggle against the occupation, employing all legitimate means to end it, the Palestinian youth have showed a high degree of readiness to sacrifice. In contrast, when their political activism has become related to narrow factional agendas and visions, the Palestinian youth are no longer willing to pay the price of internal fragmentation in favor of any of the competing groups.

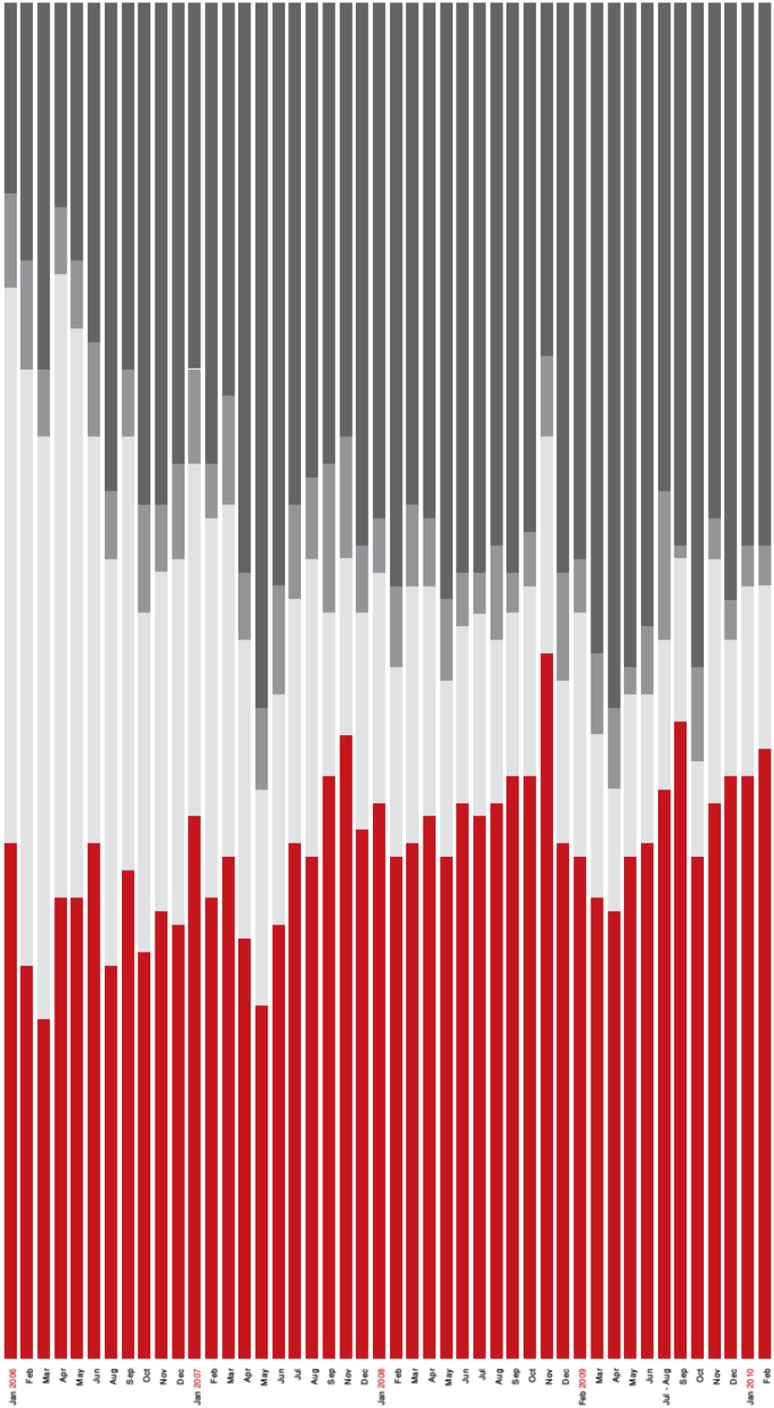
According to a survey conducted by Sharek Youth Forum in 2009, around 70% of Palestinian youth described themselves as politically inactive. Young people in the Gaza Strip perceived themselves as politically active to a higher degree than those in the West Bank, with around 37% of Gazan youth perceiving themselves as politically active, compared to 26% in the West Bank.

The survey indicated that this detachment from partisan politics is partially due to disillusionment and lack of faith and trust in the Palestinian factions, with only 33% of surveyed youth expressing high or average level of trust in political parties.

The survey findings revealed that more than half of Palestinian youth (52%) do not trust any political faction existing in the Palestinian arena, while 30% expressed trust in the Fatah movement, 12% in the Hamas movement and 6% in other factions.



The findings of other opinion polls confirm the findings of Sharek's survey. Longitudinal findings by Near East Consulting (NEC) over the period January 2006 and February 2010 indicate a high increase in the percentage of those having no trust in any political parties. In January 2006, 13% expressed no trust in any party; in June 2006, this percentage increased to 25%; in January 2007, it reached 33% and continued to rise, reaching 39% in February 2010. The following figures **illustrate the percentages of the population that placed trust in Palestinian political parties** at selected intervals between 2006 and 2010:



■ Fateh
 ■ Hamas
 ■ Other
 ■ None



The above figures manifestly illustrate that the percentage of those who do not trust any Palestinian political party started to increase since January 2006, i.e., during the aftermath of the second legislative elections and the following political polarization and armed clashes between the two major political forces (Fatah and Hamas), which eventually ended up in a state of political-geographical division between the West Bank Fatah-supported government and the Gaza Strip Hamas-led government. The numbers indicate that Hamas has been losing significant support due to the division, with the percentage of trust in Hamas showing the largest decline (from 41% to 12%). The level of trust in Fatah has been fluctuating, with an evident increase from mid 2009 in particular. Even the remaining parties that enjoyed the trust of only 7% of the public in the beginning of 2006 have suffered the loss of around half of this trust, which declined to 3% in February 2010.



One should be cautious in reading percentages from opinion polls in general. Most polls reflect a heavier decrease of support to Hamas in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank, whereas Fatah has relatively managed to maintain its support base in the West Bank and increased it in the Gaza Strip. These findings are basically related to the ability by the public in each region to assess the governance experience (security, economic and living conditions, etc.) in their respective region. Therefore, the public in each of the two regions will have the ability to criticize the government of the opposing

party in public without any reservations or fears of liability. On the other hand, the declining support to other parties may indicate a perception that they have failed to take effective action to bridge the gap between the main opposing parties or to offer a realistic alternative to the prevailing situation.



Focus group discussions held by Sharek with youth reflect the degree of the lack of trust and disillusionment among young people. According to one of the participants, *"Young people started to feel bored with political issues. From time to time, we struggle and try to search for a solution, but they, i.e., the parties, do not reach any solution. We want a real solution for the situation, Due to the status of these parties, we believe we may feel disillusioned."*

Furthermore, many young people expressed fears of (?) engaging in political partisan activism. Several testimonies by youth indicated that the margins for freedom of expression have become narrower, especially following the division between Fatah and Hamas. According to a young man, *"We cannot participate freely. The parties do not accept opposing opinions. If you want to express yourself freely, you may become in danger, you may be hurt."* Others stated that their parents prevent them from political participation, stressing that *"all parents prevent their children from engaging in political activities... If our parents have a political affiliation, we could be protected because of this."*

Conclusion: When the Palestinian political work was carried out within the framework of a national movement that believes in pluralism and tolerance and aims at a unified goal of liberation and ending the occupation, the Palestinian youth were engaged, playing an influential, active and leading role. When the role of the national movement diminished in favor of factional considerations, leading to political polarization to the degree of infighting and division, the partisan work began to lose its luster among young people and there has been increasing evidence of loss of confidence and disappointment with these parties.

Views of leaders of Palestinian political parties: admitting the situation, looking for justifications and searching for solutions

Admitting and diagnosing the gap between youth and political parties as seen by parties' leaderships



● **Mallouh: There is a problem between youth and parties regardless of using terms like crisis and despair in describing this relation**

Mr. Abdul-Rahim Mallouh, Deputy Secretary-General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, admitted that there is a problem in the relationship between youth and political parties. He attributes the problem to a crisis suffered by the political parties themselves, regardless of some terms that have been used to describe the problem, such as a state of despair or a trust crisis between youth and political parties.



● **Dr. Barghouti: There is an aversion but not to the point of crisis**

Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, Secretary-General of the Palestinian National Initiative, refused to describe the relation between youth and political parties as a state of despair and trust crisis, but admitted that a state of aversion exists. He also expressed agreement with youth that there is a need for a new style of political action that takes into account the

concerns of young people and has the potential to attract their engagement, especially through modern techniques, where national issues are presented in a sound way that corresponds to the interests and visions of young people themselves. *"So I do not see the defect in youth, but rather there is a general problem in the world, which is public aversion from getting engaged in organized political action, and this brings all political and national parties to face a big challenge."*



● **Dr. Abu Yousef: Denies that there is a crisis and describes the situation by the prevailing serious challenges**

Dr. Wassel Abu Yousef, Secretary-General of the Palestine Liberation Front, denied the existence of a crisis in the relationship between youth to political parties, while admitting that mass support to Palestinian parties is declining due to the political impasse on the one hand, and the Palestinian divide on the other. However, this decline is temporary and does not provide a clear-cut indicator that the Palestinian parties have lost initiative.



● **Bakr: Contradiction between admitting the crisis and excessive criticism**

Mr. Issam Bakr, member of the Central Committee of the People's Party, admitted (with some reservation) that there is a trust crisis and despair between Palestinian youth and political parties. He attributed it to the political programs

and policies used by national powers over the past years, which have been the main reason for the failure to recruit new people into political organizations who represent various forms and ideological backgrounds. This is in addition to their failure to generate new leadership and hold their conferences on a regular basis, among other reasons. He said that the political organizations have identified their goal as accomplishing national liberation and achieving independence of the Palestinian people (a goal that has not been achieved so far), denoting that “since the creation of the Palestinian National Authority, there has been an overlap between national liberation tasks and social tasks, causing a profound and occasionally incomprehensible confusion about the types of challenges facing the full spectrum of national powers and factions. Therefore, I think there is reluctance to engage in these parties, preventing them from expanding their membership base, as well as a decline in the level of participation in elections to student councils, trade unions and professional associations of various forms.”



● **Dr. Majdalani: Nonparticipation exists but the findings need further scrutiny and review**

Dr. Ahmad Majdalani, Secretary-General of the Popular Struggle Front, believes that these findings need strict scrutiny and review, and

therefore he does not support making generalizations on this subject. He added, *"I am especially aware that there are some aspects that indicate some degree of reluctance by young people to engage in political action, but the reasons behind this reluctance are varied."* He stressed that *"the programs of political parties so far have not lived up to the level required to address youth issues and to try to make room for the involvement of young people in decision-making. I think we have taken a step in this direction in the previous elections by amending the election law to reduce the age of nomination and voting, and I think this is an important form of political participation and integration. However, this engagement on the overall level did not translate into the level of participation in decision-making within the different political parties. With regard to the Popular Struggle Front, and within our new strategic vision, we focus on three main groups: youth, women and students... Frankly, I'd say that those who win the youth and who work among the youth are the ones who work for the future and not for the current stage only, because the youth are the future, not only for parties, but also for the country."*



● **Radwan: A crisis of partisan programs that do not respond to the hopes of youth, while blaming youth themselves for part of the responsibility**

Mr. Raed Radwan, Fatah Movement Secretary in Ramallah and Al-Bireh district, stated, *"The crisis stems from the political factions and parties addressing youth issues as pure political or partisan issues. Despite the varying level of trust, these parties do not run programs aimed at the daily living issues of young people. Additionally, no faction has so far managed to offer a convincing program defining the collective identity of youth within the Palestinian society. Another reason is the internal crisis faced by the young generation, the evident impact of the political situation on youth and the issues of ideology in its relation to political affiliations. For example, 'democratic' youth may have concerns that are too often different than those of religious youth, which has a closer position towards religion-based political parties and movements, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Therefore, it is not only a crisis of how political parties address youth issues or offer convincing programs but also one that affects their collective identity and also provides activities serving their daily-life issues."* He also pointed out that the crisis of partisan programs may be the

cause of the reluctance of young people to join these parties. *"We cannot talk about youth issues in isolation from public and national issues related to the struggle against the occupation, as well as the issue of the Palestinian internal divide. Hence, a lot of young people are concerned with issues of national character at the expense of their specific issues. Therefore, the indicator that defines the direction of the Palestinian youth is often linked to general political and national issues rather than to youth sector in the Palestinian society. This is also the result of the absence of special bodies within the civil society organizations that cater to youth issues within a unified vision. Too often, these organizations adopt a vision that is donor-driven and deal with youth issues within the limits of their ability to fundraise or attract funds for these issues as dictated by donors' programs rather than by the national development plan."*

"The reason is also subjective, stemming from within the youth sector, due to their failure to agree on or formulate their collective identity," he added.



● **Abu Leila: The relations between youth and political parties is facing an impasse and describing it as a trust crisis is an exaggeration**

Qais Abdul-Karim (Abu Leila), Deputy Secretary-General of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, believes that describing the relationship between youth and political parties as a trust crisis is an exaggeration. He said, *"In fact, the vast majority of members and activists of the different types of political powers are young people, who have always been the catalyst of the national liberation movement. Nevertheless, the national movement in general is facing an impasse because the balance of power is favoring the occupation on the one hand and because of the Palestinian internal division and the failure to reach a unified strategy to rectify the balance of power on the other hand."*

"Certainly, this temporary deadlock facing the national movement is creating a gap between the organized national movement of all kinds and the general public, who under such conditions may become subjected to frustration and low morale, reflected into lack of confidence in the existing political powers," he added.



Abu Leila acknowledged the gap between the adopted and stated programs and those implemented on the ground, which is creating a division in the relationship between the organizations and their constituencies. *“For us, in the Democratic Front, both the stated and implemented programs pay a great deal of attention to youth issues, particularly education, employment, prevention of unemployment among graduates, and youth political rights in terms of their participation on an equal footing with all other citizens in voting and nomination rights and active involvement in the existing national institutions.”*



● **Ra'fat: Search for another source of the problem, donor-driven agendas**

Mr. Saleh Ra'fat, Secretary-General of the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA), stated, *“Apparently, the role of NGOs, including those working among youth, is to make criticism and accusations in the address of political powers. I openly say that there is a new trend among young males and females, whether in occupied Jerusalem, the remaining West Bank, Gaza Strip, or in the Diaspora, to engage in political parties. This can be sensed in all West Bank and Gaza universities. In all universities and institutes, we are witnessing increased interest in joining the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA). Therefore, I am not on the same line with Sharek Youth Forum in its conclusion that young people are reluctant to join political parties. For those who are not happy with the parties in the Palestinian arena, they can establish new parties rather than sufficing themselves to the creation of NGOs and receiving funds linked to agendas that are not in the benefit of the Palestinian people but the benefit of the donors supporting these NGOs.”*



● Dr. Khatib: Political parties have overlooked youth demands

Dr. Ghasan Al-Khatib, the spokesman of the Palestinian government, said, *“Youth perception of a gap between them and the political parties is due to the fact that the work of these parties, regrettably, do not necessarily reflect youth concerns but focus on the political concern. It is true that this political concern affects everybody, including youth, but youth also have other daily-life, social and economic concerns that do not receive the due attention. Another issue is that these parties do not tend to carry out activities of the type that attracts youth attention and creates communication lines between these parties and young people. Thirdly, in their contacts with the community, these parties do not make adequate focus on contacting the youth sector and, therefore, do not manage to understand and reflect their concerns in their discourse and activities and the like.”*



● Gaza Government: Political factional reflection in the contents of the report, dominated by a language of rejection criticism and skepticism

The deposed Hamas Government's reply was a written statement, stamped by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in the Gaza government and signed by the Director General of Youth and the head of the report review committee, Mr. Said Abu

Sultan. The reply pointed out that Sharek's report, "The Status of Youth in Palestine – Promise or Peril?" distorts the resistance and national belonging of the Palestinian youth and claims that the report attacks the "government" in Gaza, accusing it of being the cause of many of the negative events taking place while saving what it called as "Ramallah Authority" from any claims of guilt.

Abu Sultan refused to compare youth as a tool or a machine that is being used by others, wondering: "*If young people are excluded, who has then initiated the Intifada?*" He also declined to confirm the anti-national character of youth actions, which he describes as imposing "law and order" in the Gaza Strip.

According to Abu Sultan, the opinion of an individual in a youth focus group is not fit for generalization, pointing out that "*the report indication that the government's interventions in youth activities are limiting the participation of young people in activities and programs*" is incorrect, because "*the government encourages every effort or activity that serves the interests of young people and even provides the required support and efforts within the boundaries of the government's general policy,*" as he put it.

Conclusion: The views of partisan leaders involve a certain degree of attempts to mitigate the severity of the problem as perceived by youth. This could be because the political parties are not willing to elaborate on their internal crises in the sense that their declining popular base (particularly among youth) is a major feature of the prevailing crisis that parties are currently facing. Two different levels can be distinguished: the first is related to the underestimation of the severity of the problem in the public discourse, although there is full awareness of its severity and planned action to address. The second level is about considering the issue as being less than a problem or crisis (regardless of its description). The latter level foresees further deterioration in the relation between youth and parties, since the admission and diagnosis of the problem is the basis for finding realistic solutions. Yet the recognition of the problem will not necessarily mean that a radical solution will be reached. So one can imagine what the situation will be if the existence of the problem is not recognized in the first place.

Solutions to the problem regarding the relationship between youth and political parties, as viewed by party leaders

● Youth and political parties working jointly to address the problem

Mallouh believed that the solution is not in the hands of the opposition parties but they have the capacity to work jointly with youth to address it.

● Searching for creative solutions that balance the interest of youth as a sector with their role in national activism

Barghouti believed that the solution lies in reaching a creative state in political work, which balances the interest of youth as a sector with their role in the national struggle.

● Youth involvement in the development of partisan programs

Abu Yousef highlighted that the need in the next phase is to bridge the gap between the declining youth participation and the desired level of their involvement in future party programs, to ensure their active involvement in partisan and national activism.



● Reviewing partisan policies and reinforcing democratic practices within parties and at the national level

Bakr expressed a need to review the policies followed by

all parties and structures in order to continue the national liberation struggle, especially through the front of the popular resistance and active popular action. In addition, it is important for parties to strengthen their organization, renew memberships and bodies and hold their conferences on a regular basis. Finally, the challenge is to ensure democratic practice in the relations between all powers and respect for freedoms and to address violations of freedoms, among other issues.



● **Inclusion of social programs focusing on the different social segments in partisan programs**

Radwan explained, *"The elected Central Committee of Fatah has a program that has not been implemented yet but is still in the process of formulation to create a program that is concerned with all segments of Palestinian society, whether it is for women or youth,"* adding that there is a need to standardize many of the concepts related to youth. *"Up to this moment, some youth organizations do not adopt a clear definition of who are considered as youth, what issues may be important for young people, and what real programs can respond to youth needs and concerns,"* he added.

● **Revitalizing the national cause, focusing on youth basic rights and ensuring their involvement at all levels**

Abu Leila demanded revitalizing the national cause in general. In his opinion, this should start by working to end the division, escalate popular resistance against the occupation, and pay greater attention to issues affecting youth, in particular to ensure their basic rights, including those of education, employment and active political participation, both within parties and within the framework of national institutions in general.

● **Ensuring democracy within parties and integrating youth into leadership**

Al-Khatib maintains that addressing the crisis between parties and youth requires the presence of young cadres in the leadership of these parties. This can be achieved by ensuring democracy in the structure of these parties and holding elections to select their leaders. Ensuring an electoral democracy will lead to the presence of young cadres in the leadership of these parties. The behavior of leadership, in turn, will be closer to the needs and concerns of young segments, and therefore this will lead to bridging the gap between these parties and young groups.

Conclusion: Although most of the solutions put forward by party leaders are relevant, there is a need to base the solutions on a holistic vision of the Palestinian partisan situation and general national priorities, within a clear, comprehensive and realistic vision of the interactive relationship between the tasks of national liberation and social tasks. Such approach is envisaged to re-establish popular support to political organizations, resistance, development and institutional building.



Following the publication of the aforementioned report and the results of the opinion poll included herein and after presenting the views of Palestinian party leaders on the report findings. Mr. **Sufian Musha'sha**, Sharek's Secretary-General, stated the following:

● **As a youth institution, Sharek seeks to convey the voices, opinions, concerns and aspirations of youth to their society and to decision-makers**

We have adopted a solid scientific approach in assessing youth views and opinions. Beyond, elaboration on the methodology we wanted the reader to focus on assessing the position of a large number of young males and females, which was reflecting clearly, their bitterness and reluctance to participate in political parties.

● **Our goal is to highlight that a problem exists between parties and youth**

We have no political agenda, but rather we aim to bring to attention of the leaderships of political parties to the problem of youth reluctance to join partisan activism. Many political parties believe they are not facing such a problem. This is to their discretion. However, some other parties expressed interest in the issue and some of them are organizing various activities aimed at strengthening their links with young people, acknowledging that youth are the future of these parties.

● **The exploitation of any young person does not allow for the creation of a generation able to complete national liberation and institution building**

The poll and focus groups revealed negative treatment of youth by political parties, occasionally reaching the extent of exploitation, especially in terms of dealing with youth as simply a tool to achieve political purposes. This stands in contrast with past practices, which were based on investing in youth and their aspirations and educating them to ensure their voluntary and active involvement in the different political groups. The conditions of security chaos and internal divide have reinforced the use of youth as 'partisan hooligans' in order to impose certain conditions. This is an unfair exploitation and in Sharek, we consider them unfitting to the reputation and history of some of these political groups. Sharek is willing to furnish requested examples and cases expressed by young people who have been victims of such exploitation.



● **Activation of youth participation and inclusion in the political life will bring positive outcomes for all. This requires political parties to ensure clarity in their programs and democratic practices in particular**

The aim of the survey, as far as Sharek Forum is concerned, lies in our belief that political organization, life and participation are very positive for young people. We also believe that the more a young person is attached and engaged in organized political action, the more positive contribution he or she can make to his or her country, society and self. However, we are afraid that the process is not proceeding properly, as parties have no specific plans and programs for recognising the importance in investing in their youth members' education. We have listened well to the voices of youth and attempted to pass them on to parties in the best way we could.

We call upon political parties to confront these challenges. Young people feel bitterness and this bitterness has transformed to a lack of enthusiasm. These parties are facing a challenge. It is their responsibility, and not ours, to find answers for these findings.

● **Organizational education based on tolerance and awareness can establish a sound organizational life and effective involvement of youth**

The future leadership of any party is based on the organizational, partisan education of all cadres, regardless of their position in the party. If there is no interest in educating party members and exposing them to positive experiences and if parties fail to contribute to the building of open-minded cadres with the ability to respect the opinions of others, practice self-criticism, learn from mistakes and contribute to expanding tolerance within their own parties, this will

only mean that such parties are doomed to vanish. Nobody whether in Sharek or elsewhere can define parties programs. Each party has the adequate expertise, experience and living examples to develop programs that respond to the aspirations and hopes of youth. it is unreasonable that the programs of these parties in the 1970s and 1980s were very sensitive to the needs of young people, but in 2010 they are not sensitive.

Any reputable party is expected to consider this issue and take it seriously. Swift action at a high level is required on part of all parties by conducting an internal consideration of the issue of youth involvement and concluding their own judgments.



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