Arab Reform Initiative

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From inside and outside: Palestinian youth reshaping old electoral systems

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Palestinian artist paints an election related graffiti on a wall ahead of elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council to be held on 22 May, in Gaza City, Gaza on March 24, 2021. ©AA/Mustafa Hassona

Introduction

Just three months after issuing a presidential decree to hold presidential and parliamentary elections, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas went back and postponed them amidst disputes over voting in Israeli-annexed Jerusalem. The three-month window following the presidential decree presented an opportunity for the quick formation of 36 electoral lists. While the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections ended before they even began, this period still witnessed different forms of youth engagement. Young Palestinians say the stagnation of the democratic process has marginalized their generation in a society in which more than half the 5.2 million Palestinian population are under 29. Palestinians under 34, all of whom have spent their formative years under the framework of the unsuccessful Oslo Accords, have never had the chance to vote in national elections.

Despite the PLC offering - in theory - a chance at democratic reform, the electoral legislation limits youth political participation in many ways. Palestine's 2007 Electoral Law denies youth inclusion and participation with Article 45 requiring candidates or aspiring PLC members to be 28 years of age on polling day. Article 36 also stipulates that the presidential candidate be at least 40 years of age on polling day. Having failed to lower the age of candidacy, recent data issued by Central Elections Commission indicates the deprivation of 880,000 eligible voters of competing for seats in the Legislative Council (about 31%), and more than 1,815,000 Palestinians (about 63%) of running for the presidency. Additional obstacles impeding youth participation in electoral processes include the 2007 electoral law mandating that PLC elections take place "based on a proportional representation system (list system) composed of a party, coalition of parties, or a group of voters." While proportional representation is said to provide room for marginalized groups to compete in the electoral process and to win later, youth representation has been relatively low in the years following proportional representation in municipal elections.

The consequence of youth disenfranchisement from political decision-making has

been reflected on society as a whole, with youth being affected on different levels. While the tone of media coverage may seem to suggest that Palestinians have rushed to register for the now-postponed elections, this paper highlights an increased polarization in youth political engagement. It is important to highlight this as it simultaneously shows a lack of foreign support to improving youth's economic and social circumstances and a misrepresentation of the current state of democracy in Palestine. In a context of increased political sensitivity, this apathy has led to increased unawareness of how current laws disenfranchise marginalized groups, a point stressed in multiple interviews conducted for this paper. Much campaigning is thus twofold: candidates must first explain why exactly the system is not serving the interests of their demographics, and *then* they can propose why they are best placed to solve these issues.

Young people agree that the whole system needs to be reshaped, from institutions to their leadership and political groups. Despite the difficult circumstances under which young people are living, the 2021 elections presented them with a chance to reassert their presence in the political scene. Yet, Abbas's unilateral decision to postpone elections represented the same dilemmas they hoped to overcome — marginalization and lack of proper political representation. Nonetheless, 2021 showed ambitious attempts at breaking the hegemony present in the state apparatus, either from inside or outside the traditional electoral system.

The following analysis is informed by an examination of available statistics as well as by interviews with experts, representatives from civil society, and representatives of new groupings such as *Tafaha Al Keyl*, *Al-Tajammu' Al-Shababi Al-Mustaqil "Helm"* (The Independent Youth Group "Dream" - *Helm*), and *Jeel Al-Tajdeed Al-Democraty* (The Generation for Democratic Renewal - JAD). As a result of these discussions, this paper uses a dual definition of youth that encompasses both an age range (18-45) and a reformist mentality when engaging with political issues. Given that the last national elections occurred 15 years ago, there is a large amount of crossover between the two categories.

Change from Within

Confronted with a political reality that fails to adequately represent their demands

and provide a platform for their voices; youth are becoming increasingly polarized in their levels of political engagement. While there was near unanimity among those interviewed that political apathy in general is on the rise, the presence of highly galvanized independent youth parties indicates a growing awareness and engagement among some segments of the youth. Of those who put forward their candidacy for the now postponed elections, 38.5% were aged between 28 and 40. In terms of absolute representation, this is already a larger percentage than female candidates, who account for only 29% of the 1391 candidates. It was not possible to find data for the intersection of female youth candidates, although it is worthy of note that this exceeds the 26% women's quota as called for in the amendment to the 2007 General Election law.[1]

The parties running are split along several lines, with the most salient being in political affiliation; of the 36 parties running, 7 are affiliated to existing political parties and 29 are listed as independent. Youth are present in all lists, though few parties focus uniquely on youth and youth issues. Prominent parties are nonetheless aware of the importance of the youth vote, with both Hamas and Fatah reaffirming the importance of youths in their list and in political decision-making processes. Despite the many promises to address youth demands by all parties running for the elections, only three of the 36 can be qualified as exclusively "youth" parties. All three are independent with platforms that focus on fighting corruption and increasing youth participation in society, be it through increased employment or political engagement. These are: *Tafaha Al Kayl*□□□) ,(□□□□□*Karamti al-Shababiyya* and,(□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□) *Helm*□□□□□□) .("□□□" □□□□□□□ □□□□□□□

Table 1: Details on the three youth parties

Party	Average Age	% Women	Political Affiliation	Women's number on list
Tafaha Al Keyl	40	30%	Independent	3rd
Karamti al-Shababiyya	N/A*	33.3%	Independent	3rd
Helm	34	29%	Independent	2nd
Average	37	30.7%	N/A	N/A

**There was no response to our enquiry*

Data drawn from interviews and the Central Elections Commission.

Youth politically engaged within the current system continue to do so for one main reason: they believe that change can only be fruitful and legitimate if it comes from within. They believe they must work within existing structures in order to effect change and combat such pressing issues as corruption, unemployment, and marginalization, which have seen large swathes of the population disenfranchised both financially and socially, with a disproportionate effect on youth. This disenfranchisement is clear in the lack of political representation, with Mohammed from *Helm* saying that "they speak in the name of the youth, but they are far from being one of us." This being said, all those we interviewed demonstrated a categorical refusal to adhere to traditional party lines and policies. This rejection of the establishment is indicative of a distinction drawn in their minds between democracy as an ideal, the strength of democratic practices, and the state of democracy within traditional parties (but not, importantly, within the political system itself). This distinction further solidifies the idea that the current parties operate *within* a potentially democratic system but do not define the limits of this system.

It is this frame of mind which leads to the formation of youth-specific parties; on the one hand, they feel the necessity to be entirely independent of traditional parties, and on the other, they believe that non-youth-focused parties will not have youth priorities high on their agendas. Accordingly, youth parties maintain solid electoral agendas that are focused primarily on providing opportunities for Palestinian youth, especially given the high unemployment they currently face. Both *Tafaha Al Kayl* and *Helm* emphasised the role that corruption and the absence of any democratic process over the past 15 years have had in impeding long-term and sustainable economic development and also in hindering meaningful youth participation in political life. When asked for more concrete details on how they would fight corruption, Mohammad Ayman Shalabi from *Tafaha Al Kayl* in particular mentioned that their internal legal council would spearhead this effort.[2]

Echoing what has been mentioned above, it is critical to note that the younger generation displays strong conviction in the ability of state mechanisms and does not see them as inextricably linked with political representatives; all those

interviewed expressed a belief in the democratic processes leading to and resulting from, among others, the universal application of the rule of law, the constitution, representation in the PLC, the right to hold elected officials accountable, and an independent judiciary.

Those interviewed frequently emphasized the intersectionality of their lists and their demands, targeting their demographics through a combination of door-to-door knocking and electronic campaigning, both of which allow them to maintain a grassroots presence while expanding their reach. Although they regretted their inability to meet in person, parties interviewed were clear that the presence of online platforms enabled them to increase their presence across all of Palestine, regardless of physical boundaries. This has also served as an effective method for campaigning in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This outreach also crosses borders to include the Palestinian diaspora, which all of our interviewees mentioned as an important actor in the postponed elections although they are unable to vote. Experts have also called on the EU to provide logistical support that would enable the diaspora to officially vote in Palestinian electoral processes, though international actors seem caught within the trappings of vaguely-defined democracy, with Israel and Abbas engaging in a game of cat-and-mouse that has caused the delay in legislative elections.

While being politically active, these youth groups are also on the forefront of grassroots mobilization around social issues. *Helm*, for example, mentions that their political goals are much longer term than the current elections, and that their engagement on the ground is equally important. Indeed, the group was formed by participants in the violently repressed 2011 protests, where youth called for an end to the Hamas-Fatah political divide. *Tafaha Al Keyl* also indicated that, following the postponement of the elections, they will focus more on grassroot mobilization, saying that they will continue "to combat corruption and defend the Palestinians." This can be seen in their calls for a transparent investigation following the death of human rights activist Nizar Banat. These acts of mobilization are emblematic of a citizenry that is becoming increasingly politicised in response to the failure of the State to address their needs. The role of Palestinian civil society in these cases is to provide the population with accurate information and to ensure that they are fully aware of their rights, explains Majeda al-Saqqa, Gaza-based activist and civil

society actor.[3] Inès Abdel Razek, Advocacy Director at the Palestinian Institute for Public Diplomacy (PIPD), points out that the current question is how to turn this grassroots awareness raising into a sustainable form of political mobilization across the entire country.

Despite their activities, the geographical divide with the Gaza strip forcibly disconnected from Jerusalem and the West Back, impedes full mobilization. Young people perceive this geographical separation as a restriction on their ability to participate freely in Palestinian political and decision-making processes. The head of the *Helm* youth political party, Fadi Salah, described geography as the "biggest logistical problem" their party faces in terms of campaigning and outreach.[4] Asserting that online campaigns have helped bridge the physical separation between governorates, they note that old-fashioned billboards are no longer efficient. Similarly, Shalabi, a representative from the *Tafaha Al Kayl* electoral list, reports the party's frustration with the absence of physical contact due to to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing measures. He speculates that the lack of courage among youth to engage in meaningful political participation is a consequence of the traditional parties' firm grip on public spaces. Nonetheless, he discusses the party's increased reliance on social networking platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp to reach people, explaining that the party maintains different WhatsApp groups for all 16 governorates.

In addition to geography, the financial hurdles required to participate in politics, and especially in the PLC, constitute a major obstacle. "Youth would have had a lot more potential had it not been for the laws and the funding" elaborates al-Saqqa: "Donors went for women, but this didn't work, because the youth were being forgotten." She also criticizes the performative nature of the 26% quota for women in the PLC, claiming that this has not been effective in promoting independent progressive voices for reform. This underlines the exclusion of youth from the international eye, with donors prioritizing checklists to democracy that are ignorant of local context and on-the-ground realities. As a result, there is a greater marginalization of other important social groups.

Funding poses one of the biggest electoral challenges for groups that prioritize self-financing. The legally mandated membership deposit[5] hinders youth political participation and their full independence. As such, interviewed youth political

parties claim to rely uniquely on internal funding from group supporters and networks, completely rejecting external funding. “We have been approached by political groups who proposed money in exchange for the group’s allegiance or withdrawal, and we refused,” says Shalabi. “If I want to fight corruption, I should start with myself.” While youth parties explain that they have been courted by traditional parties with funding proposals, candidates insist that their independence is strictly tied to self-funding.

When it comes to individuals, however, the larger parties take advantage of their financial backing and the economic situation to provide jobs in return for political support. The patronage systems that are then created serve to further entrench current systems of corruption and are explicitly tied to the youth lacking in opportunities to improve their situation. The postponement of the parliamentary elections deepens the financial burden of self-funded youth parties, who will have a much harder time keeping themselves relevant in the face of parties backed by external donors.

Change from Without: Jeel Al-Tajdeed Al-Democraty

In contrast to politicized youth who believe that change must happen from within the system, there are also youth who believe that change must come from the outside. This year saw the establishment of *Jeel Al-Tajdeed Al-Democraty* (Generation for Democratic Change – JAD), a youth group whose goal is to create a youth organizational body to push for democratic reform outside the official Palestinian electoral process. Ahead of the Palestinian Legislative Council elections, JAD launched a “Virtual Parliamentary List” made up of young Palestinian running on an alternative platform. Present digitally and on the ground, JAD aims to offer a democratic alternative “in the absence of a representative, inclusive, and democratic Palestinian political system”. JAD considers the list a form of protest against the restricting electoral laws and an exercise in how democracy and political participation should be.

As a response to the PLC postponement, JAD released a statement affirming that it will “go ahead with its Virtual Parliamentary List (VPL) and virtual elections.” The

statement condemned the Palestinian leadership's lack of transparency and public consultation, insisting that the elections offered an opportunity for mobilization after 15 years of politically marginalizing the people. Abbas's unilateral postponement withholds the people's fundamental right to democratic representation and emphasizes the financial gap between traditional and newer parties. In an interview conducted 3 May, 2021 Salem Barahmeh, a member of JAD, anticipated that the virtual list would be the only democratic process in the country if the elections were postponed.[6] He clarifies, however, that while JAD is not participating in the official elections, they do not encourage people to boycott them, stressing that JAD does not stand in the way of political participation but rather presents an alternative idea that fundamentally redefines and changes the broken system.

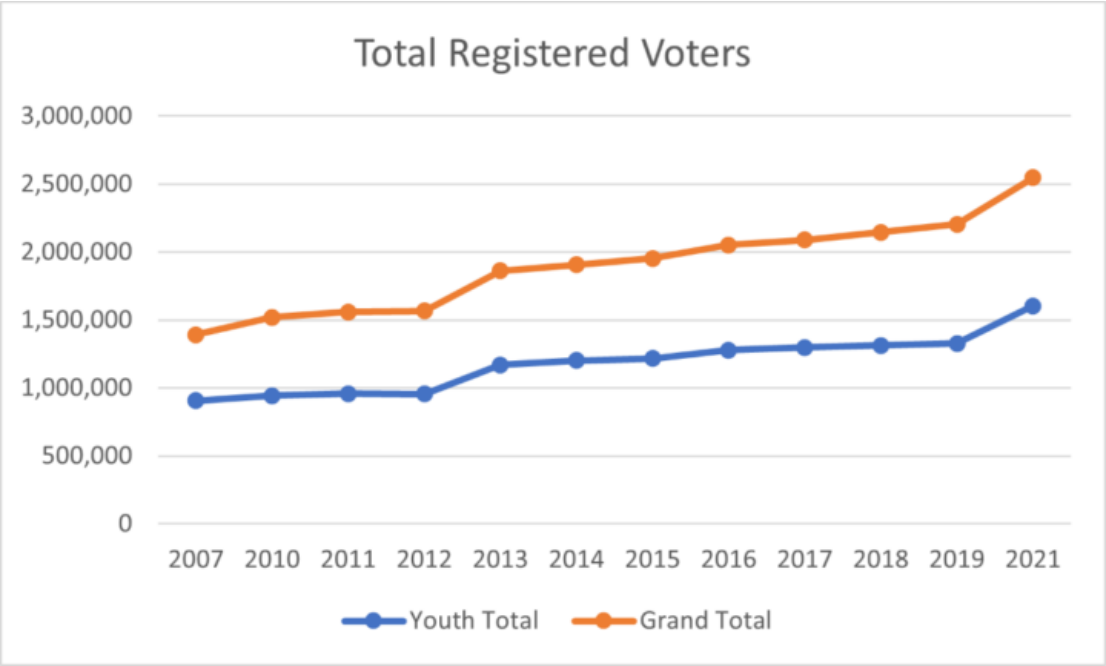
The digital list builds an inclusive alternative infrastructure that delegitimizes the broken political system, and challenges the status quo through incorporating wider age, financial, and geographical flexibility. JAD considers the PLC's expensive membership deposit[7] as one of the prime reasons behind the establishment of their virtual parliamentary list. As such, JAD self-funds internally, without the support of external groups. It also gives room for younger ages from across Palestine to participate and compete. Palestinians aged 18 to 45 from the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem were able to submit their nominations online by the end of April. Out of 58 nominations, majority being from Gaza, 18 candidates were eventually elected by JAD members — a 50/50 male to female ratio was maintained, representing diverse backgrounds in terms of geographic locations, professions, social backgrounds and disabilities. The collective and participatory nature of these movements presents progressive democratic alternatives to traditional parties.



Screenshot taken from: https://tajdeed.ps/

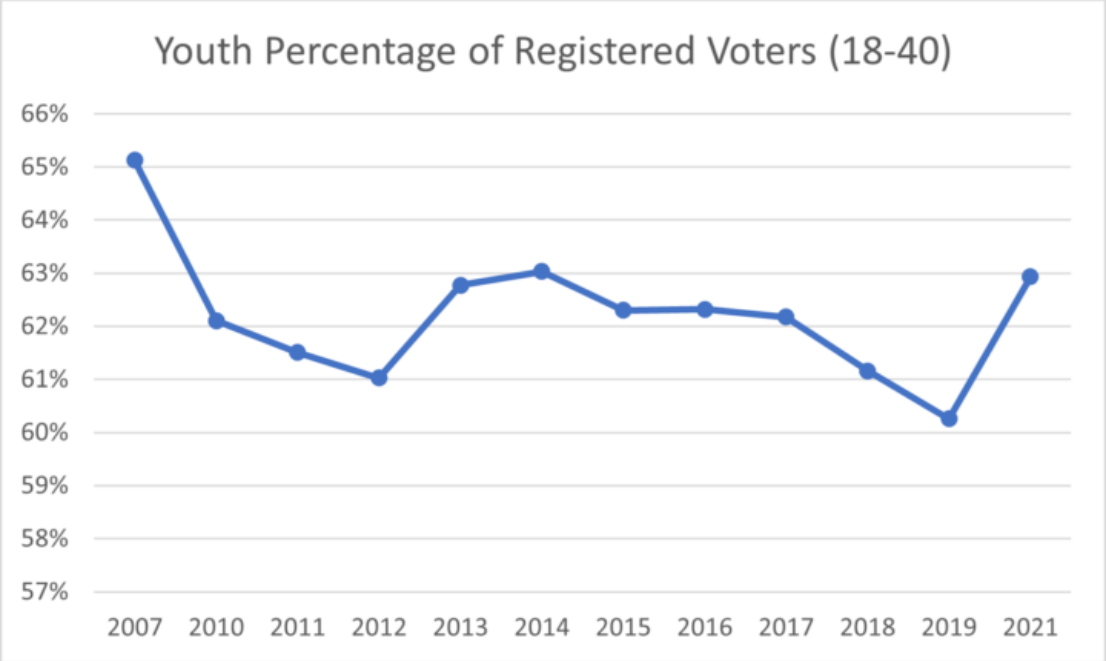
Despite efforts at raising awareness and engagement, Salem Barahmeh tells Arab Reform Initiative that political apathy in young people remains one of the biggest challenges they are facing. He describes the total of 2.6 million registered voters at the end of the registration process as misleading figures, explaining that voter registration is mandatory for all high school students. According to Barahmeh, the registration numbers are not indicative of the levels of youth political participation, especially in the absence of awareness on how the electoral laws disenfranchise the youth and serve the interests of the two big parties, Fatah and Hamas. The graph below shows that these numbers have been steadily increasing since 2007, an increase attributable to mandatory registration in high school.[8] Graph 2 similarly demonstrates that the youth demographic has not experienced an explosion of interest following the announcement for elections this year.

This political apathy can in part be attributed to what many see as deeply entrenched networks of clientelism and corruption, which encourage youth to adhere to a specific traditional party in exchange for financial advantages. With unemployment rates skyrocketing and COVID-19 devastating Palestine's shattered economy, younger people are orienting their lives towards basic necessities and are focused on survival, Barahmeh explains.



Graph 1 – Total Voter Registration Numbers in Palestine

* Data drawn from the Central Elections Commission



Graph 2 – Percentage of youth (18-40) as eligible voters

*Data drawn from the Central Elections Commission.

Inès Abdel Razek from PIPD agrees with Barahmeh on the absence of political education, and the need for a systematic rehaul. She says that a big chunk of society thinks that anything political is bad and prefers hitting into the streets and resisting the occupation in civil disobedience instead of shaping different responses. However, Abdel Razek acknowledges that the latest 11-day Israeli aggression broke the barrier of fear and saw a spike in mobilization and confrontation with Israel. She says in both Gaza and 42 the West Bank, there is an appetite for change, while Jerusalem exemplifies lower levels of interests because of the Palestinian Authorities and the Israeli hegemony. She adds that the occupation has managed to fragment the people geographically, politically, and socially, thus cultivating skepticism and political apathy. Despite the different crowds, Abdel Razek explains that the common denominator between the people is their weariness with the old factions, Hamas, Fatah, and even the left as well; the PLC consolidates the traditional parties that continue to instrumentalize the laws, thereby rendering futile the existing democratic model. She suggests that grassroot organizations are now rejecting this model and demanding a democratic renewal, especially in the absence of cultural and media spaces to sprout political knowledge. She reiterates that JAD believes in representation, but not through the PLC.

While the day of voting may be vaguely described as democratic in the presence of international spectators and logistical support, JAD members agree that elections day is not a caliber of democracy, and that the whole system requires a democratic revamp. JAD adopts different progressive means to engage in democratic elections, especially through relying significantly on social media and digital campaigning. They aim to engage all disenfranchised Palestinian communities, with Barahmeh mentioning that JAD considers the diaspora to be a part of their core constituents and hopes to include them in future elections. The interviewed JAD members emphasised the importance of rebuilding the overall political space without giving legitimacy to the same faces .

Virtual Campaigning: A Common Denominator

While virtual spaces have maintained an adequate alternative for the limited physical civic spaces, Palestinian youth trying to organize inside and outside the system remain restricted in their capacity by to the authorities constant crackdowns. Amnesty International reports have criticized the authorities in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip for violating the right to freedom of expression by arbitrarily detaining individuals solely for peacefully sharing their views on social media. “They need to be free in campaigning, but they are under Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in Ramallah,” emphasizes al-Saqqa; “the minute they enter Gaza, they will be arrested.” Reflecting on the geographic separation, she explains that youth are unable to campaign from one city to the other without facing geographical barriers and social media crackdowns by authorities, while ‘other parties’ have large enough social and financial reach to circumvent these barriers.

Where social media is involved, access can be equally restrained due to political censorship and connectivity issues. Social media companies censoring conferences and supressing resistance and mobilization impedes youth’s ability to share their stories and adequately organize. As such, these platforms do not always offer the safest revolutionary spaces and can be complicit in this silencing. They are, however, not always accessible to begin with, as the question of reliable internet and electricity access in Gaza presents an equity issue in any future elections. When access to social media and internet is restricted or limited, traditional parties have the advantage in campaigning. In the face of such limitations, continued presence online and active social media pages are a testament not only to the strength of emerging youth parties and alternatives such as JAD but also to growing willingness among the young population to engage in political issues.

Conclusion

For youth in Palestine, the way ahead is troubled and the road to full political participation is long. Drawing on the above analysis, we propose several ways in

which Palestinian youth might be able to make their voices more meaningfully heard in national political processes.

The international community should:

1. Exert pressure on Israel to adhere to international laws and hold Israel accountable for not doing so. In the context of this paper, this could be in relation to polling stations in Jerusalem, not repressing activism and civil movements, ensuring Gazans have adequate access to necessities by lifting the blockade.
2. Condition funding and donations on practices of meaningful participation. The question of quotas is often raised and receives extremely mixed reviews. While some of those we interviewed suggest pushing for a youth quota, others point out that similar quotas for students in the PNC or for women in the PLC have served as tokenistic displays of democracy and have not enabled these groups to push for reform. Indeed, parties may often use the abovementioned patronage system to present an intersectional façade while maintaining corrupt networks. In accepting this, international actors inadvertently legitimize the current system.
3. Engage with grassroots initiatives that are outside the current political system in order to renew current political trends.
4. Support initiatives that create and foster inclusive and democratic political spaces accessible to all Palestinians wishing to participate in political processes more widely.

Eligible Palestinian voters could:

5. Seek out information about independent parties and parties that more closely align with their views.
6. Learn about how existing laws work to continue the marginalization of those not already in power.

Youth in Palestine could:

7. Create a social media presence that is adapted to the Palestinian context

and to regional/international audiences, so as to:

1. Further promote engagement of Palestinians in the diaspora and provide them with platforms to make their voices heard.
2. Engage and raise awareness among the international community about the difficulties faced by Palestinian youths who run for political positions.
3. Expose and report social media censorships and takedowns through advancing Palestinian Digital Rights and reporting to organizations such as 7amleh who document such violations and liaise directly with platforms like Facebook and Instagram. This would foster a safer and more open virtual space for dialogue for youth parties who hope to engage in Palestinian political life.

Endnotes

1. See: the amendment to the General Law which originally called for 20% representation.
2. Interview with Mohammed Ayman Shalabi from *Tafaha Al Keyl*, 19 April 2021.
3. Interview with Majeda al-Saqqa, 26 April 2021.
4. Interview with *Helm*, 19 April 2021.
5. Article (49): *Candidacy Surety* of Palestine's 2007 Electoral Law expects electoral lists to deposit a nonrefundable guarantee of ten thousand USD.
6. Interview with Salem Barahmeh, 3 May 2021.
7. Article (49): *Candidacy Surety* of Palestine's 2007 Electoral Law expects electoral lists to deposit a nonrefundable guarantee of ten thousand USD.
8. Interview with Salem Barahmeh, 3 May 2021.

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About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

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