

# Youth contribution

'Being part of the military wing gives you authority here in the camp'

*'Aous' with Sally Youssef*

My name is (Aous),<sup>1</sup> and I am an 18-year-old Palestinian refugee living in a refugee camp, in Lebanon.

I first got involved with the Fatah movement<sup>2</sup> through my scouting group when I was around seven or eight years old. I used to hold a flag and go with the other scouts to protests about the Palestinian cause and the status of Palestinians in Lebanon, wearing a blue shirt that they gave me. I was taught by my family and by the scouts to love our homeland Palestine – and to never forget the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, no matter what happens or has happened since. By the time I was 16, I had become a group leader in the scouts. Then, two years ago, I joined the Fatah guard. Being in the scouts helped me to enrol in Fatah, as they prioritise people from within the scouts. Now, at the age of 18, I am with the scouts and the military wing and am responsible for managing a group of other boys and young men.

To join I had to undergo military-style training in the mountains near the camp to become a Fatah guard member. We did lots of crawling, push-ups and sports, and we learned how to do raids, how to effectively intervene in dangerous situations and how to aim and shoot at a target. I also learned how to use a rocket launcher and shoot a gun.

My current job is to escort and protect Fatah officials and ensure their safety. If an official comes to the Fatah offices I escort him and guard the

room, and if he goes out of the area I escort him anywhere he goes. I love my job. I protect a high-level official! He used to be famous. When he came to the camp, many boys started to join Fatah, including me. Some of the officials before him were pigs and hypocrites. Having a good leader motivates us to take our work more seriously. If something happens to him or he dies I will be the first one who leaves Fatah in protest, because he is a fair person who believes in justice.

After I enrolled with Fatah everyone started liking me. Officials and people from the camp I had never talked to before began to recognise me from meetings and speak to me. Fatah also showed me places in the camp that I had never seen before, even though I am from the camp and live here – such as secret alleyways, underground bunkers and weapon stockpiles. My family were also very encouraging and happy when I became a guard. Some of my friends and my brother now want to join too. My uncle is a lieutenant, and he was the one who encouraged me to enrol with Fatah in the first place. I too want to reach the level of lieutenant, though it took my uncle 13 years. Working for Fatah also means you get a salary and progression, with opportunities to earn more as you move up the ranks. When you first start, you earn less, but as you receive training and learn more about Fatah and its goals, your salary improves. If you are in the higher ranks, you can even get protection from legal recourse if you are arrested for participating in armed violence.

In the camp, there are many problems. Thieves and drugs make it unsafe for everyone. This motivated me to guard the camp against such things, especially since there are children here whose lives are affected. For example, there was a time when we had to kick someone out of the camp because he used to sell drugs to very young children. The number of robberies has increased since the Lebanese economic crisis because of the impact on the currency. That's why I wanted to be a guard – to protect my people and the camp. Being part of the military wing gives you authority here in the camp, including preventing those who are not within Fatah from accessing weapons.

I don't see my role within Fatah as participation in politics. As part of the military wing, I support with information sharing and mobilising people for protests – for example, one day we were informed about a protest because of Palestinian deaths in Gaza, so we shot in the air during the funeral and organised a march for the people who died. We also participate in meetings to discuss activities. Being part of Fatah means that I have the opportunity to speak directly to officials about the problems affecting young people in the camp and try to find solutions. However, there is an age hierarchy, and young people are not permitted to express their opinions until elders have

**FIGURE 28.1**

Adolescent Palestinian boys living in Ein El Hilweh camp, Lebanon.

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spoken. This is different from the scouts, where you can have a discussion with the leader and express your opinion. While I feel I can speak for the youth in the context of these meetings, I do not feel that I am able to influence other young people in my current role – and young soldiers like me are certainly not able to have a say in top-level decision-making.

## NOTES

1 Pseudonym.

2 The Fatah movement is a Palestinian nationalist movement that has been involved in revolutionary struggles for Palestinian liberation since its founding by diaspora Palestinians in 1959. Fatah is the largest faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and its chairman, Mahmoud Abbas, is the current President of the State of Palestine. A number of militant groups across the Middle East are connected to Fatah. Fatah is the dominant faction in the refugee camp where (Aous) lives and has long held security control over all Palestinian camps. Given that Palestinian refugees are unable to obtain Lebanese citizenship, political factions like these are one of the few venues that young people in the refugee community have to participate in politics.



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