



# Ten Years of Impact and Insights: AFSC's Palestine Youth Program (2013-2023)





The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) was one of the first organizations to implement youth programs in Palestine. This work is deeply personal to me. Growing up in the West Bank, I felt fragmentation every day. My whole world was Ramallah and Jerusalem, and there were no interactions with our brothers and sisters inside the Green Line, the border that separates pre-1967 Israel from the occupied Palestinian territory. On Sundays in the 1970s and 1980s, my family would sometimes drive to Gaza for a leisurely meal of seafood, but we were largely confined to a very small community. Israeli government policies tried to keep us from forming a collective, common identity. There was no communication with or connection to Palestinian refugees in the diaspora. Remarkably, I did not meet an Arab from outside Palestine until I attended college in the United States.

My story is not unique. Whether they are from Gaza, the West Bank, Israel, Jordan, or Lebanon, young Palestinians have similar experiences. They have been kept apart by physical and institutional barriers that separate them, deliberately preventing them from sharing ideas, strategizing solutions, and forming community. This is why AFSC has spent the past 11 years, since 2013, focusing on advancing ways to create connections.

This work is never easy but is always inspiring. When young people come together—in physical, virtual, and hybrid spaces—their discussions and debates prove powerful. To date, more than 5,000 of them have participated in our programs. They cannot be stopped: their voices resonate and will not be silenced. Now part of a powerful network, they are resilient, focused on freedom, and in possession of an unbreakable bond that envisions a different future. Their commitment to one another—and to a shared Palestinian identity—is cause for celebration, even in this current moment of darkness.

Thank you for reading their stories and learning about the power of AFSC's Palestine programs.

In peace,

Joyce Ajlouny



I was born in and spent the first two decades of my life in the Gulf. In 1999 I learned that if I did not travel to Jerusalem, I would lose my right to return to the city. Shortly after arriving in Palestine, it became clear that I had to put down roots or I would be stripped of my identity. Palestine became home.

The country I discovered at age 22 did not resemble the one I had long envisioned. Most Palestinians, I quickly realized, were just regular people. What differentiated them was not only nationalism and the desire to overcome their oppressor but, additionally, the intense isolation and fragmentation imposed on them. Starting in 2000—and then even more so in 2007, when Israel put Gaza under a total blockade—that fragmentation intensified and became a tool to divide and conquer. Today there is a generation of young Palestinians who, because of the Israeli restrictions on mobility, have never left their small communities. They do not share a consensus on what it means to be Palestinian. Equally troubling, their identity is often shaped by the media and different educational curricula. Textbooks and narratives, for example, are used to intensify fragmentation of the Palestinian identity—and of the Palestinian people.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has worked in Palestine since 1948, and its Quaker values have always been crystal clear. Unlike other organizations that refuse to engage in political discussions, AFSC calls out injustice. It acknowledges and addresses how the occupation, checkpoints, restricted movement and rights, and minimal resources prevent Palestinians—in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Gaza, Lebanon, and the rest of the diaspora—from creating a dynamic society. When I joined AFSC as a staff member in 2017, our primary focus was on creating space—virtual and in person—for young Palestinians to meet and come together. We want them to think, debate, and learn that even if you disagree with your neighbor, you can still build consensus around the need for community.

Over the past 11 years, we have taught young Palestinians how to listen to each other before they make decisions. That capacity has set them up to be leaders, and many of our program participants are driving key changes. As they become adults, we see them increasingly turning into professionals and leaders serving their communities. Some of those success stories are in this report—many more are to come.

In solidarity,

Dawood Hammoudeh

## PROGRAM GOAL:

AFSC convenes young people –from Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon– in virtual, hybrid, and physical spaces, so they form meaningful connections and build resilient Palestinian communities.

From 2013 to 2023, AFSC's Palestine Youth Program served 5,781 young people from Palestine, including the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza; Israel; Jordan; and Lebanon. The 2023–2026 cycle will include approximately 2,000 additional young people.

### Program Partners:

Al Shabaka  
Baladna - Association for  
Arab Youth  
Birzeit University  
Pal-Vision

### Program Evaluation Partners:

ABC Consulting  
Jamal Atamneh, with Fariza  
Basiso and Amal Abu Srour  
Samar Baidoun  
Serena Hulaileh

## PROGRAM ACTIVITIES:



Workshops



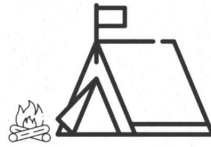
Discussion groups



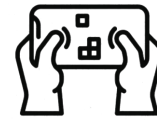
Trainings



Virtual and Field tours



Summer camps



Creation of online games



## Participant Stories: Nida Al Nassar

Born and raised in Haifa, Nida is a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship. After completing the 2013 to 2016 cycle in AFSC’s inaugural “Youth for Change” program, she became a youth leader at Baladna, an NGO that provides Arab-Palestinian youth with the space and tools to exchange ideas and build leadership skills. Nida has served as Baladna’s director since 2019. Here she talks about fragmentation and how to build community and baladna—the Arabic word for “home” or “my country”—while living in what she describes as a “deprived reality.”



*My parent’s generation witnessed and were so frightened by the Israeli wars that their main concern was to avoid conflict and protect their children. They steered clear of taboo topics, which meant anything that involved Palestine. Instead they emphasized individual success.*

*My generation was taught to study, get good grades, and attend university. We were encouraged to pursue work opportunities and have our own families. That was it. We never learned about our culture or the history of our people or the land on which we live.*

*At Baladna, our first goal is to serve as educators. We start by helping young Palestinians explore their history. That sounds simple, but it’s not. In Israel, organizing is criminalized, and we are encouraged to keep our heads down and focus on the mundane realities of our daily lives. All children born in Israel abide by policies dictated by the Israeli Ministry of Education. We have our own segregated Arab schools, but these teach the Israeli Zionist narrative. In that story, the Palestinian nation never existed, and Palestinians should normalize and accept their inferiority.*

*Once young people begin to understand how they’ve been indoctrinated with false narratives, they need the space to process and discuss their feelings. And then they can begin to understand how discrimination shapes every aspect of our lives—from education to employment—and why the fight for Palestinian rights is a fight for human rights.*

*It isn’t easy to engage teenagers; long lectures don’t work, but board games are interactive and can expose the challenges Palestinians face. We have one that’s about the siege of Gaza. There’s another one that’s about the right of movement in the West Bank and a third about our land crisis and the destruction of our homes. The government, particularly this one, does not want us to do this work. We are always on edge and always being hassled, but if we want to preserve our culture, we must keep going. We don’t have the privilege of stopping.*

## Participant Stories: Abed Alsalam Balawi

Established in 1955, Beddawi Camp is one of 12 Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Located near Tripoli, it is home to Abed Alsalam Balawi, who was born and raised there. Now age 21, Abed participated in AFSC's Shabab program in 2022. He spoke to us about meeting Palestinians from other areas for the first time and what makes the program so powerful.

*A friend of mine told me about the AFSC program, and I thought it sounded interesting, so I applied. To be completely honest, I forgot about it after I submitted my materials. When they called a few weeks later and told me I had been accepted, I figured it was a rare opportunity to meet Palestinians from other regions—people I would never be able to connect with if it weren't for the Shabab program.*

*I grew up in Beddawi. It is full of people I know and who are just like me, so it feels comfortable. Everyone can relate, and our circumstances are the same. In some ways it's like a giant family, and we all live happily together. But there is also a dark side. It is very poor; I have had to work since I was eleven years old. I spent my whole life there and left only to attend the Lebanese American University.*

*There were about 40 of us in the Shabab program. It was impossible to get visas, so we were split into small groups. The Gazans met in Gaza. The West Bankers met in the West Bank. The Jordanians, in Jordan. My group met in Beddawi. And we did a lot of*

*work virtually, over Zoom, but we succeeded in meeting one another and connecting and forming friendships. I had never been with Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza. I thought that they were so different from me because they live under occupation. I imagined them to be depressed and miserable. I thought that they might judge me or refuse to speak to me. I didn't expect to learn that they were doing normal things. I didn't expect that they would love their lives or even know how to love. I was completely wrong.*

*The project lasted six months, and all of us agreed that we would focus on how violence impacts children. The 15 of us from Beddawi wanted to show how dangerous it can be for young people to access education. The camp is littered with dangerous electrical wiring, and we wanted to create something that would show safe ways to get to the primary schools.*

*When we shared our ideas, there was no judgment. I think that's because AFSC really knows how to choose facilitators. They were professional but friendly*

*and approachable and not much older than us. That part helped too. They knew how to make everyone comfortable. And there was one main rule that guided everything: be respectful.*

*The program made me see that we are more alike than different. We share a culture. Until the war started, I spoke to my friends in Gaza all the time. Now that there is no connection, it is very hard to get in touch. It's so hard to behave normally right now. My friends keep asking me what's wrong. I'm very afraid that I will lose people.*



## Participant Stories: Ahmed Yassin

Ahmed Yassin is an AFSC program officer who completed the 2013 to 2016 “Youth for Change” program cycle. Now 33, he is a West Banker who lives in Ramallah with his wife, Randa, and their three young daughters. As a Palestinian who holds a West Bank green ID, Ahmed is constrained by and confronted with checkpoints and challenges that he struggles to explain to his children. Here Ahmed (pictured below, far right) discusses why the personal is political and why consensus is so important to the Palestinian identity.

*This might sound strange, but the main reason I wanted to work with AFSC was so that I could talk with and have an opportunity to meet other Palestinians—’48ers, Gazans, and other West Bankers like me. Because we don’t have normal ways to connect, Palestinians have all kinds of misperceptions about each other. When my wife and I became serious, people questioned my motives. They kept asking, “Who is this guy?” To my in-laws they said, “Why are you sending Randa to the West Bank? What if Ahmed is just looking for papers?”*



*We can’t understand each other from what we read in books or watch on the internet. Palestinians can live just a few kilometers apart, but they never interact—they might as well be on other sides of the planet, and so there is so much misunderstanding—and even fear of one another. I felt that personally when Randa and I got together.*

*The main question our program addresses is whether it’s important to have a collective Palestinian identity or if we should just act normal—like people in other countries whose geography dictates how they see themselves. We discuss whether there are characteristics or even a single trait that defines all Palestinians. And we think about what a future free of fragmentation would look like. We dare to imagine a world without checkpoints and all the challenges we have today. And then we ask how we would want Palestinians to identify in that imagined space.*

*AFSC is very focused on driving debate that builds consensus so*

*there is a binding principle that holds us together. The minute we came together, we agreed that we experience the same challenges. We felt it was our responsibility to raise awareness about stereotypes and to explain that a Palestinian identity is much more complex than a national one.*

*This is not easy work. To reach Palestinians all over the country, I must go through so many checkpoints. It’s dehumanizing. When I stop to think about it—or when my four-year-old daughter asks why I had to get out of our car and why I disappeared—I ask myself why I do it. I always come back to the same answer: we are reaching people. I know this when I see their eyes light up. I know this when I meet students in schools. I know it because it is personal and because I feel the power that comes from it. I think there’s a noble feeling inside of every Palestinian, even if he’s building a settlement or working in a degrading job or crossing a checkpoint just to reach a hospital. This feeling is special, and it’s energizing. It gives me the strength to live my life and do what I can for my people.*



## Participant Stories: Mahde Ismail

Mahde is a university student and one of the nearly 62,000 refugees who lives in Al-Wihdat (Amman New Camp), one of the first four Jordanian refugee camps set up to house Palestinian refugees. Created on 0.48 square kilometers of land, the camp is located southeast of Amman. It is crowded and challenged by high levels of unemployment, with the highest rate of chronic health issues in all of Jordan's 10 Palestinian refugee camps.



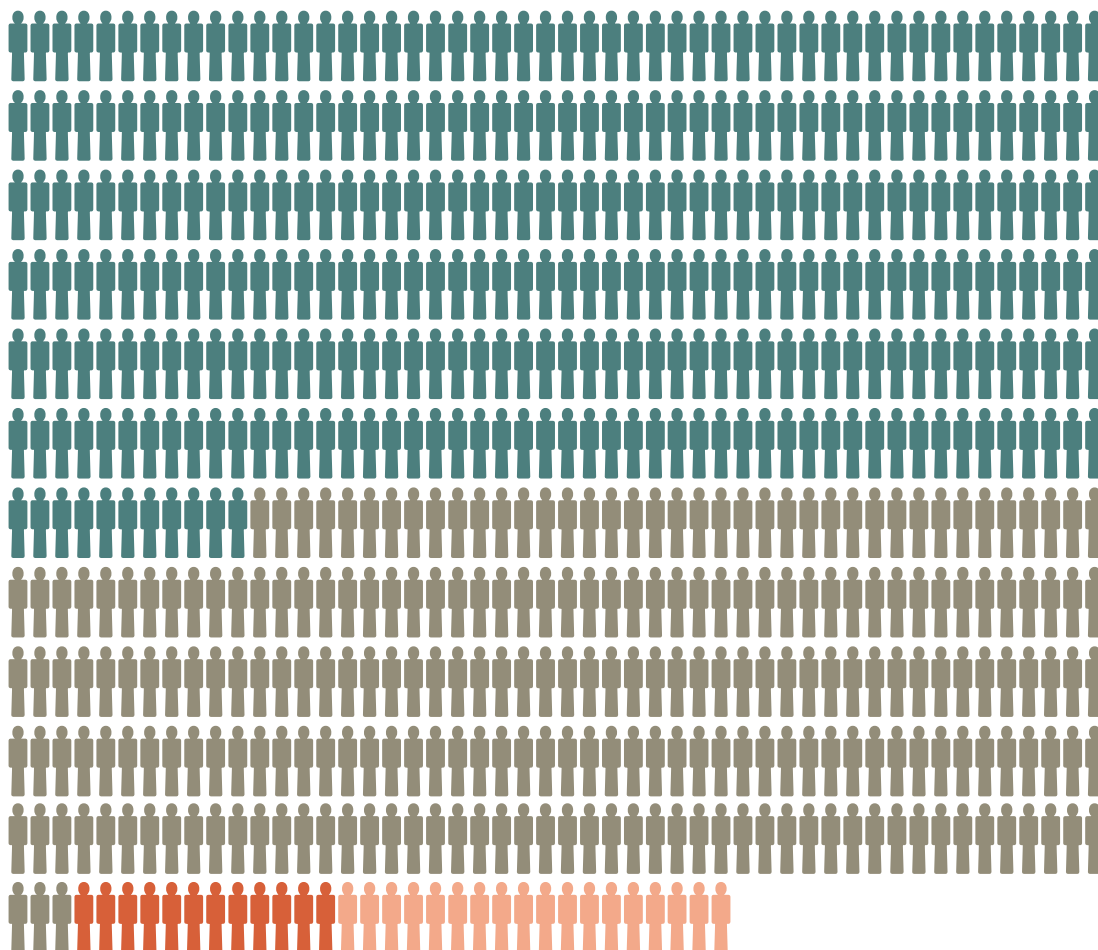
*Wihdat does not have the best reputation, and there are drugs on every street, but my childhood was relatively calm. I spent 10 years in the UNRWA school, and there were usually 50 students in a class. That was challenging, and there are so many stereotypes about us, but I did the best I could and avoided many of the things that get people in trouble. Not everyone here has the mentality to grow and be useful, but that's what I wanted to do.*

*For as long as I can remember, my father taught me about the Palestinian cause. Every night before bed, he would tell me about a beloved neighbor of ours who lived in Nablus before she married and came to Amman. She was the only person I knew who had ever actually been to Palestine. I wanted to learn more about it and read everything I could, but Palestine felt very far away.*

*When I was in my first year of university, a friend knocked on my door and said she was helping an NGO with some statistics about young people. I was curious about this work, so she sent me a link to register with AFSC, and then I began a training program with them. For six months I collaborated on an oral history project called "34 Stories." The number represents the major Palestinian cities. Our goal was to profile displaced Palestinians and share their stories.*

*Working on this project changed my life forever. I began to know myself and realized that I was an artist—that I could draw and be creative. I met Palestinians from all over the region and became very close to some young people from Gaza City. Until the war began, we spoke every day. Now I pray that they are safe.*

**TOTAL DIRECT BENEFICIARIES: 5,781**



**Youth (aged 14-20)**

**Girls: 3,106**

**Boys: 2,418**

**Young Adults (aged 21-25)**

**Girls: 39**

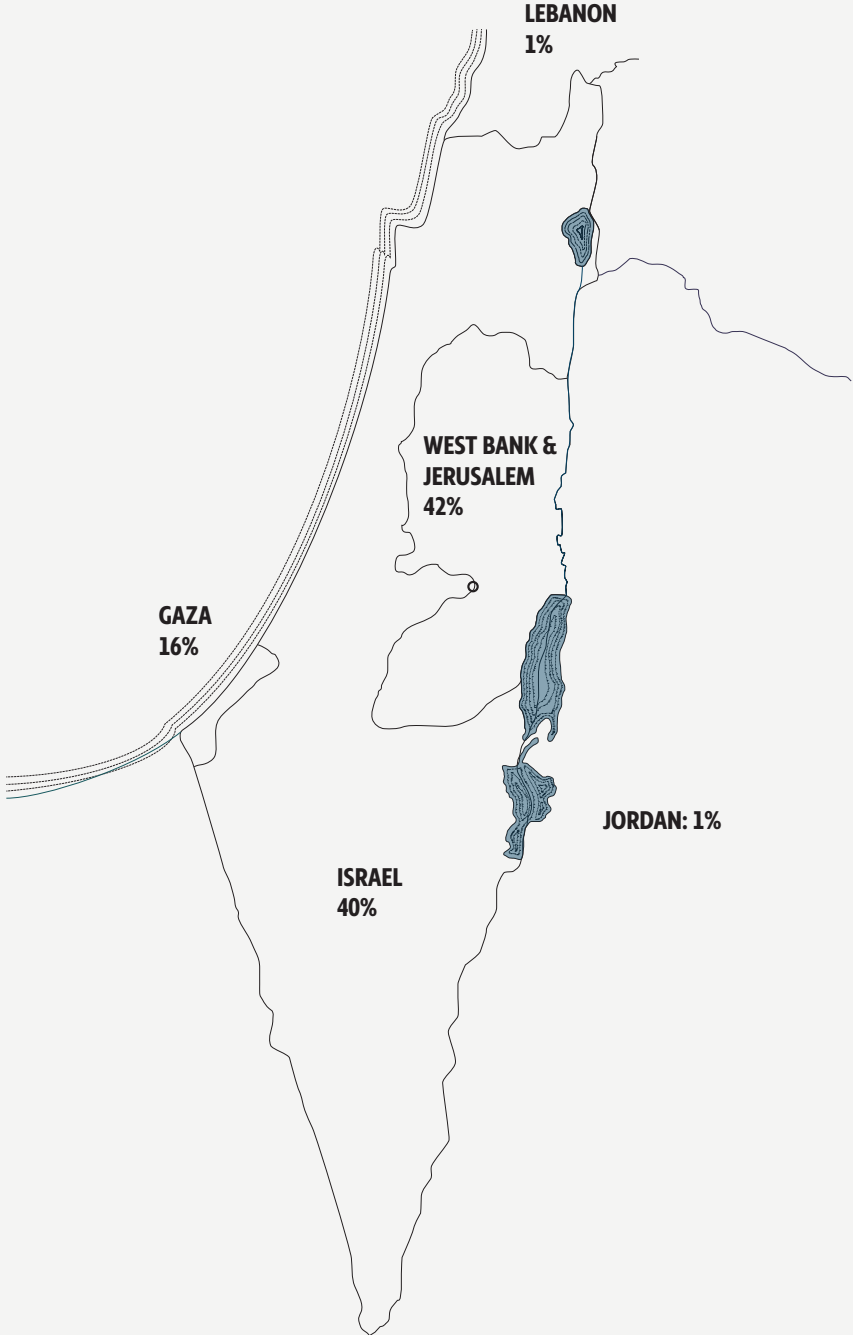
**Boys: 34**

**Children in Summer Camps**

**Girls: 85**

**Boys: 99**

Palestinian participants come from throughout the region.



## A DECADE OF DISCOVERY

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has worked in Israel and Palestine since 1947. Over the past 75 years, we have been committed to ending fragmentation and creating just and lasting peace and a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression.

The program names for our activities have changed—Tawasalo and Youth Together for Change are now called Shabakna—but the goal to break down barriers and create environments in which young Palestinians can engage in discussions, debates, and decision-making remains consistent.



**Palestinian youth explore Jerusalem as part of their field tours.**

The region's realities—conflict, division, and constant change—require us to regularly revisit and revise strategies, solicit frequent feedback, and pivot when we aren't meeting our goals. As such, we have developed deep relationships with the youth and their communities but also with partners, facilitators, and experts, together with our funders and evaluation partners. This has proven invaluable, encouraging improvements to enhance and expand outcomes. Here we look back on the past 11 years to highlight what's worked well and to acknowledge areas for improvement.

Our work is powerful, changing young Palestinians' lives by disrupting the fragmentation that has kept them from forming valuable community, consensus, and comradery. More specifically, our programs showed at least three valuable insights.

### **1** **Connection Breaks Stereotypes**

Young Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza, historic Palestine, and the diaspora are disconnected from one another—both within regions and, especially, across them. Deliberate, carefully calculated restrictions on movement prevent people from traveling and meeting one another. As a result, young Palestinians are most likely to learn about one another from media—including social platforms—which frequently perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to othering. In contrast, when young people have meaningful opportunities to connect, they develop empathy for one another, begin building a collective identity, and form nuanced understandings that are based on actual interactions rather than preconceived ideas.

### **2** **Continuity Is Critical**

AFSC was one of the first organizations to implement youth participation programs in Palestine, and some of our earliest work created a model that is still used by Palestinian national organizations like the Sharek Youth Forum and PYALARA. Our constant presence and commitment to the Palestinian people have positioned us as a beacon of hope in a region that has, unfortunately, been abandoned by many NGOs and philanthropic organizations. Our ability to continue programming even when border closures, COVID-19, and conflict restrict in-person meetings has bolstered our credibility, making us a trusted partner to and advocate for the Palestinian people. We need to continue to “show up.”

### **3** **Virtual and Hybrid Programs Are Impactful**

During COVID-19 and in other periods when movement was restricted and in-person gatherings were not possible, AFSC avoided disruptions and shifted to online, virtual, and hybrid programs. In the past three years alone, we hosted more than 100 virtual tours and reached 1,900 young Palestinians. The tours were successful: they provided participants with unique opportunities to visit other Palestinian communities and created opportunities for connection, dialogue, and critical analysis of the similarities and differences across geographies.

In addition to increasing the number of participants who could attend tours, the virtual structure also made it possible to host post-discussion meetings the same day as the tour, when impressions and thoughts were fresh and conversation flowed easily. Though virtual tours are certainly not a substitute for in-person meetings and face-to-face encounters, they allow critical continuity in moments of crisis, ensuring that extenuating circumstances do not preclude or shut down our programming.

As a learning organization, AFSC is committed to continual improvement. Our external evaluators identified areas for improvement and made several key recommendations.

### **1 Refine virtual and hybrid programming.**

There were four specific recommendations.

Lengthen tour time: Participants reported that 45-minute virtual tours were not long enough and shared that they would have appreciated additional, more frequent tours.

Change venues: The tours were aired in noisy, distracting venues, making it difficult for viewers to sustain attention and digest what they experienced.

Allocate more time for discussion: Time constraints inhibited discourse. Concerned that short conversations could be damaging and reinforce stereotypes, staff sometimes made the difficult decision that no discussion was better than an abbreviated one.

Online platforms: Staff and facilitators need additional training so they can best utilize and leverage virtual programming. With increased tech fluency, staff can stay connected to—and engaged with—program participants beyond the life cycle of the program and activities.

### **2 Disaggregate cohorts by age and diversify geography**

From 2013 to 2016 the AFSC Palestine program did not disaggregate participants by age. Instead, young people between the ages of 14 and 25 were placed in the same cohorts, which proved problematic as there are huge differences across this age spectrum. Young people between the ages of 14 and 18 are, of course, often in school and reliant on their parents and families for their physical, psychosocial, and economic needs. In contrast, 19- and 25-year-olds tend to be in a different life stage, whether they are attending university or working and earning their own money.

Following the suggestion to disaggregate the participants by age, AFSC created two tracks: one for young people between the ages of 14 and 20 and a separate track, beginning during the COVID-19 pandemic, for young adults between the ages of 20 and 25. This should continue.

Similarly, just as evaluations revealed that we must be more

deliberate in creating age-appropriate cohorts, data also showed the need to be more intentional about recruiting program participants from a broader diversity of areas.

We also learned that to end fragmentation, we must look beyond East Jerusalem and Haifa, where we have strong connections and networks and increase our scope to ensure that we are reaching participants in Gaza, Jordan, and other areas.

### **3 Improve inclusivity**

While evaluations found that our programs succeeded in attracting and engaging young women and girls, we need to do a better job in two important ways. First, we need to reach young people with disabilities. As program participants pointed out, digital tours, which do not mandate that participants stand or move around, are an excellent way to reach people for whom physical activity poses challenges. The modest costs associated with digital tours also provide an additional opportunity to reach more young Palestinians.

Second, program evaluations suggested that there is utility in expanding the program to younger participants, who are fast learners and have not yet been inundated with media and the stereotypes they enforce. Working closely with spaces frequented by adolescents, such as clubs or schools, would enable this expansion and would have an impact, especially if younger people stay with the program for a sustained period.

## FUTURE OBJECTIVES

In the 75 years since the 1948 war, the Palestinian population has experienced extreme imposed fragmentation. Palestinians are physically separated by geography: 50% are in the diaspora, with no clear plans or paths to return home. Another 38% of the population lives under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. The remaining 12% are considered Israeli citizens and experience enforced isolation. The divisions are deliberate and designed to keep people from forming meaningful connections.

As such, Palestinians experience a world in which political life is criminalized, civil society is constrained, and a national identity is deeply discouraged, if not impossible. Young people are particularly disenfranchised, disengaged, and divided.





Gazan youth visiting Jersualem for training and exchange.

## Future Objectives: 2023 and Beyond

Research and reports, including the Palestinian National Development Plan (NDP) for 2021–2023 and AFSC’s PESTLE analysis and needs assessment, as well as partner consultations and our most recent project evaluations, show that identity, fragmentation, and resilience are the most urgent issues facing Palestinians today.

Launched in July 2023, the next phase of the program runs through June 2026 and includes two 18-month sessions. Our goal is to reach approximately 2,190 additional youth participants between the ages of 14 and 20; 160 young people between the ages of 20 and 25; and 20 staff from community-based organizations in Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon, who will receive training on how best to host and support youth when civic space is both shrinking and under frequent attack. We also seek gender parity and increasingly offer opportunities to young people with disabilities.

Whether conducted virtually or in-person, program activities will seek to counter negative narratives, shift perceptions, and foster an emboldened, connected youth generation. AFSC participants will develop a clear understanding of the issues facing the Palestinian community, strategize about addressing the root causes of their problems, and build lifelong connections that unite them in a common purpose.

More specifically, the program has three main objectives:

**1**

### **Build more resilient communities**

Participants will receive a unique curriculum in team building, in remote communications, and in designing, leading, and implementing campaigns, initiatives, and activities. They will learn concrete skills and form five small subgroups to share ideas and conduct projects inspired by their interests and the needs of their communities. Participants will also receive extensive psychosocial support that addresses their trauma and provides healing.

**2**

### **Increase knowledge about Palestinians’ shared identity**

Participants will engage in physical, virtual, and hybrid activities to exchange knowledge, share experiences, and discuss how separation fosters inaccurate perceptions. These activities will inspire dialogue and build a much-needed sense of cohesion, helping participants dispel stereotypes and write new narratives based on lived experiences rather than preconceptions.

**3**

### **Provide civil society organizations with capacity to build community resilience**

AFSC and external monitoring and evaluation professionals will provide civil society organizations with training on diverse topics—identity, fragmentation, group dynamics, and group management, among others—so they can support and manage Palestinian youth groups. Learning and skills will be codified into a written manual that will be shared with local communities and civil society groups so they can replicate this work and scale it to reach more young Palestinians.



**Palestinian youth in Lebanon developing an initiative in a local refugee camp.**

"We were trying to break all those stereotypes, identity issues, and our shared sense of fragmentation by creating activities that encouraged young people to interact, talk, and build friendships. This helped them let go of misperceptions and build new ideas."

—Program leader

"It was very interesting for me to meet people from different places and share experiences with them. There is such a gap between youth who live across the occupied Palestine territory, but over time we started to accept and understand the differences between life in the West Bank, Gaza, and the 1948 areas."

—Program participant

"For the first time, I was able to meet young Palestinians from other areas and learn about their lives. Before the program, I only knew Palestinians who lived in Israel, but now I have relationships with people from Gaza, West Bank, and Jordan. Talking with them expanded my perspective beyond what I knew from the news. The AFSC tours changed my point of view toward the 'other.'"

—Program participant



In September 2023 we released "Mosaic," a radio road trip spotlighting AFSC staff and community leaders across Palestine. Featured guests include Dawood Hammoudeh, our Palestine program manager; Nidaa Nassar, a former program participant based in Haifa; and Ahmed Yassin, a former program participant based in the West Bank and now an AFSC program officer. All three of these bold leaders are bringing together Palestinian youth to overcome fragmentation. You can listen to their stories and learn more about equity, identity, and the Palestinian experience at <https://afsc.org/news/mosaic-podcast>

"Mosaic" is produced by Marisa Mazria Katz and Robert Bound, with the assistance of Jason P. Drucker.

**Brot  
für die Welt**



**Quaker-Hilfe  
Stiftung**

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For more, visit [www.afsc.org/assembly](http://www.afsc.org/assembly)