

Building Resilience To Radicalisation: Youth-Targeted Interventions in the MENA region.

Evidence submitted to the British Council APPG Inquiry into Building Resilience to Radicalisation in MENA

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This evidence is informed by the author's participation in two European Commission-funded multi-partner Framework 7 projects, POWER2YOUTH and SAHWA.

POWER2YOUTH brings 13 institutional partners from around the Mediterranean, offering a comprehensive multi-level, interdisciplinary and gender-sensitive approach to the understanding of youth in the SEM region with a cross-national comparative design (case studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Turkey). - See more at: <http://www.power2youth.eu/>

SAHWA brings together fifteen partners from Europe and Arab countries to research youth prospects and perspectives in a context of multiple social, economic and political transitions in five Arab Mediterranean countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon). See more at <http://www.sahwa.eu>. Professor Murphy leads a work package on POWER2YOUTH which draws upon the empirical findings to assess youth policy implications for the European Union's policy towards the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean states. She is on the Academic Advisory Board of SAHWA. She has previously written on aspects of MENA youth and acted as a consultant to the World Bank on its 2014 report: *Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion*.

“radicalisation doesn't begin because the transportation is not free: it begins if people cannot do anything about it being free” (urban movement activist, Turkey).

It is not a youth problem!

Young people in the MENA region comprise the majority of local populations. The median age of populations in this region (that is, the point at which a half of the entire population lies either side of the line) ranges from 21.8 in Jordan to a highest 31.4 in Tunisia. By contrast, the median ages in Europe hover at 40.9 in France, 46.5 in Germany, 43.5 in Greece and 40.4 in the UK.

The life-experiences of, and prospects for, these young people are very different from what they might have been thirty years ago, or when their parents were moving from childhood to adulthood, and research such as the POWER2YOUTH and SAHWA projects have demonstrated that this is very frequently – although not universally - in a negative direction.

Understanding the ways in which young people are marginalised – that is to say why they are unable to improve their conditions because they are cut out from any form of power over them – is useful in understanding why they might pursue radical forms of violent action.

I am using the term marginalised here and not excluded. Exclusion/inclusion suggests a binary position where one is either excluded or included. The term is problematic for two reasons: firstly, it implies that to be 'included' is necessarily a good thing, but when we are talking about authoritarian political structures which privilege supporters and criminalise opponents, is it really good to be 'included'? Is inclusion in a patriarchal family structure which perceives of girls as being the property of their older men-folk normatively desirable? Is low-pay, unprotected, unsafe wage labour better than informal employment smuggling gasoline across a barely-managed border? We have to ask 'included into what'? Secondly, it fails to recognise that the extent to which the true and the precise construction of the marginalised experience is infinitely varied and depends on social class, gender, area of residence, nationality, religious identity, tribal or family connections, party membership and a host of other aspects of contemporary life. One can simultaneously be excluded in one domain (for example, lacking employment and economic security, but included within a safe, trusted family or local community where one can voice opinions, be listened to and experience well-being. Few people are genuinely and absolutely excluded in any society, but they all experience greater or fewer degrees of marginalisation across the various political, economic and social dimensions of their life. Addressing marginalisation in one area with, for example, an active labour market programme that targets youth, does not resolve issues of political or social marginalisation and probably won't lead to long-term solutions for individuals or groups.

In the MENA region, the forces which impel marginalisation are perhaps felt most intensely and densely by youth. But these are usually not 'youth problems' per se. Rather they are problems in areas where youth are at the front-line and which youth encounter more consistently and immediately than older groups. However they become 'youth-concentrated problems' as youth are also likely to have the least social capital with which to confront the difficulties they face.

The experience of being young

1. Youth are narrated within two principal frames: 'Youth as Problem' or 'Youth as the Future of the Nation', both of which are instruments for political control rather than reflections of the life experiences and interests of youth themselves. Studies of national and INGO youth policies and strategies show they promote discourses which understand youth as either 'good' or 'bad'. Good youths are those whose social, economic and political activity conforms to practices actively promoted by governments which are largely authoritarian, patriarchal and neo-liberal. This includes, for example, being members of regime political parties, participating in regime-sponsored initiatives targeting young people, and conforming to conservative social behavioural norms which reproduce political passivity. Bad youths are those who do not conform, who actively challenge or who abstain from participation. In this frame, political activism which rejects state discourses, or behaviour which challenges traditional social norms, is equated with criminality, drug abuse, potential violence, and social deviance.

In short, regimes set the terms of reference for young people in ways which sanction or even criminalise efforts by young people to define their own needs, interests and

perspectives. At the extreme end, regimes use violent means (including assault, arbitrary arrests, detentions and human rights abuses) to contain young people's dissent and free expression. This state-control over the narrative of what it means to be young leaves no room for the reality of young people's lives, leading to policies and strategies that are unable to address the real difficulties they face and leave them feeling voiceless and powerless.

2. Youth in the MENA region are experiencing increasingly extended transitions to adulthood. They remain in full-time education for longer, are likely to become financially independent of their families at an older age, marry later, have children later, and leave the family home later. All the social markers which are associated with adulthood happen later than they did thirty years ago and with significant consequences for young peoples' sense of personal autonomy or their material independence. In a social setting where young, unmarried, dependents remain very low in the (patriarchal) family hierarchy, and where celibacy before marriage is an issue of (family) honour, the contradictions of reaching emotional and physical maturity without the accompanying social markers can be overwhelming. Young people, exposed to more education than their forebears and enjoying new forms of global popular youth culture and communications, often live two lives – one at home and one outside the home, switching from child to adult in a constant process of navigation between multiple identities. The process can be particularly complex for young women, with norms requiring social control over their bodies being in sharp contrast to their need for opportunities to express their adult personalities. It is also problematic as governments and INGO interventions to support youth are determined by biological boundaries (age group), usually ending at 29 years or at most 35 years of age, while large cohorts beyond that age continue to experience life as youths.

3. The MENA region has witnessed a massive increase in the proportion of young people attending school, completing high school and proceeding to University education over the past thirty years. However numerous reports by organisations like the World Bank and the UNDP have high-lighted the relatively low (even deteriorating) quality of education which poorly prepares young people for the demands of a competitive, globalised and increasingly technologically-driven labour market. Schools are over-reliant on rote-learning and authoritarian teaching modes (as well as poorly-paid and motivated teachers and under-resourced schools). It is important to note, however, that education is not just a means of supplying the labour market. Young people recognise that they receive little training in critical thinking or structuring arguments as authorities (political and social) seek to keep them passive and unable to formulate challenges. The privatisation of education increases the attainment gaps and opportunity structures between socio-economic classes, reinforcing privileges and relative deprivations. Statistics indicating relatively high expenditures on higher education than in OECD countries, and the rising proportion of young people attaining a higher education, paper over the reality that university enrolment is used as a means of disguising the lack of job opportunities, and of keeping young people dependent and politically passive. University graduates across the region have equally if not higher rates of unemployment than those with lower levels of qualification, and are profoundly aware of the deficiencies of their education in preparing them for the labour market.

4. The region suffers from high rates of unemployment and under-employment, and is increasingly characterised by precarious forms of work and a reliance on the (growing) informal economy. Government measures to encourage investment by reducing regulatory burdens on firms which protect labour impact most heavily on new entrants to the labour market (young people), whilst rising retirement ages and diminishing pensions mean older people remain in posts for longer, closing the entry opportunities for young people. Informal employment, often supplementing under-employment, is increasingly the norm for young people, offering low incomes and no security. The disconnect between aspirations fostered by longer periods in education and qualification inflation on the one hand, and the opportunities for work, income, savings and future security on the other, are widespread and tangible for young people.

5. At the same time, neo-liberal economic programmes encouraged by the conditionalities of international financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, have led to diminishing social welfare provision by the state. Large sections of the populations of the MENA region cannot afford private sector substitutes, with increasing numbers reliant on family and community networks. For most young people, there is no equivalent of job-seekers' allowances or income support payments. If they are ill or disabled, they can rarely afford any but the most basic medical treatment. Food subsidies and anti-poverty interventions are increasingly targeted towards the most poor, resulting in a large floating middle classes which can slip into poverty at any moment and which is increasingly mired in private debt.

6. Young people, especially those without regular employment or who seek to escape the confines of living with their parents, are especially affected by the poor quality of urban space. Rapid urbanisation, compounded by poor planning and deeply embedded corruption, has led to insufficient affordable housing for young couples, inadequate public transport and very limited and often unsafe pedestrian spaces. Municipal services like rubbish collection are limited and of low quality, and there is poor provision of utilities such as water and electricity. In this environment, it is difficult to find safe youth-friendly spaces, to engage in social and leisure activities, or to simply move safely, affordably and without anxiety. Urban spaces feel like little more than prisons for many young people, daily physical manifestations of their own restricted opportunities.

7. Simultaneously, poorly serviced and largely neglected rural communities lack employment opportunities for young people, public investment, transport and communications connections, or appropriate public educational and health provision. Young people, who lack employment and independent incomes have little hope for a future in these areas. Young men are impelled to migrate away from them, either to the cities or abroad, with all the accompanying insecurities, while young women are more likely to be obliged into marriage as a means of reducing the burden they represent on the family home.

8. Young people high-light the importance of nepotism, clientalism and the culture of 'wasta' (relying on personal connections to attain jobs, services, status etc), in determining the opportunities open to them. As competition for jobs in particular tightens, 'connections' become more important, meaning that young people are even more subordinated to older people already in positions of (any) power, regardless of

their own education or merit. Lacking political, economic and social power, leaves young people particularly vulnerable to the endemic corruption which pervades MENA countries.

9. Young people indicate their frustration with the privileging of age-based seniority in ALL institutions, including political parties, civil society organisations, government ministries, publicly-owned companies and families. They feel their opinions are not welcome or valued, and that they are considered non-people if they have not reached the markers of adulthood or are unable to marry and have their own household. As their transitions are extended well into the age of physical and emotional maturity, and as they develop cultural and political personalities of their own, they become increasingly frustrated and experience deep social marginalisation in both public and private spheres.

10. Ironically most countries now have legal institutions defending individuals from arbitrary practices and discrimination based on age. Indeed, after the Arab Spring, constitutions were revised in some countries to recognise the rights and representation of young people. However, in their daily lives young people experience the lack of rule of law, the inability or unwillingness of public judicial or other bodies to enforce regulatory regimes (or their willingness only to enforce them arbitrarily) and the continuing uncertainty and insecurity in all areas of their lives. This includes public *and* private lives, which is particularly problematic for young women who rarely find protection from abuse in the private sphere through application of the law.

11. Young people in the MENA region are often politically active, although the evidence suggests that their preference is for informal and alternative modes of activism and participation rather than through conventional political institutions such as parties or government youth projects. They engage in protest, single-issue campaigning, cultural politics, and social media activism – preferring youth-friendly spaces and behaviours. Conventional political spaces are often avoided, either because older cohorts dominate institutions and make little space for young people, or because they are considered corrupt and co-opted by authoritarian regimes with no legitimacy in the eyes of young people.

12. Research across the MENA region indicates that young women continue to suffer more consistently and to a greater degree across all the areas of marginalisation mentioned above. Despite national commitments to international conventions protecting women and promoting their equality, the reality for young women is that - despite being more likely to achieve a higher level of education than their mothers – they continue to be under-represented in the labour force, to be subordinated to patriarchal norms and practices in both home and the public sphere, to be vulnerable to emotional and physical abuse, to face sexual harassment in employment or public social spaces, to be poor and to lack financial and bodily security.

Insecure lives and the Constancy of Violence

The evidence gathered through the POWER2YOUTH project demonstrated that young people's lives in the MENA region are marked first and foremost by the absence of security (physical, material or psychologically). They are constantly aware of explicit and implicit, usually arbitrary, 'red-lines'. Crossing these can easily and unpredictably result in violence within the everyday. A young women, going into the

street to do the shopping risks sexual harassment or rape. A Palestinian youth travelling to University has to face armed soldiers at an Israeli check-point. A Lebanese youth, crossing through Beirut, has to traverse sectarian enemy territory. An Egyptian blogger never knows when the knock will come at the door and the day end with electric shocks in jail. With neither jobs nor welfare safety nets, young people lack an economic or social future (marriage, children, a home of their own). With Arab Spring protests leading to, renewed authoritarianism (eg: Egypt), civil war (Libya and Syria) or at very best a still extraordinarily fragile transitions (only Tunisia), they lack faith in a political future. For many, the absence of a future is also marked by the constant possibilities of violence in the present. In this context, the dangers of irregular migration across the Mediterranean are balanced by the dangers of staying behind and the violence of radical Islamist movements is not an aberration but an extension of everyday life.

Vulnerable to radicalisation

These multiple marginalisations impact differently on every individual depending on their gender, social class, economic status, ethnicity, religious identity, place of residence or national context. It is beyond the research in POWER2YOUTH or SAHWA to know if personality or psychological factors play a role in how they position young people against the appeal of radical Islamist organisations. But the research does raise important questions about the extent to which such organisations offer young people an important sense of empowerment to compensate the profound disempowerment which these multiple marginalisations represent.

The research also leads to the conclusion that youth-targeted interventions work best when they enable young people to define for themselves how to develop their social capital. Top-down government-led initiatives and interventions are often beset by the very problems of corruption, cronyism, political capture and lack of trust that constitute part of the multiple-marginalisation paradigm. The research suggested that programmes initiated at the local, often municipal level, and in which young people were actively engaged in the design and implementation stages, were most likely to result in positive outcomes. Interventions that provide safe space in which young people can meet, deliberate, network and exchange knowledge and skills are invaluable, whether they are virtual or physical spaces. Such spaces enable young people to experience a feeling of inclusion and of personal empowerment, unimpeded by relative age-defined status. Similarly, interventions which challenge the normative acceptance of violence in everyday life and promote the possibilities for young women to be safe, active citizens are crucially important.

Who constructs 'Youth' as a social category

It is important to recognise that the multiple marginalisations listed above are not experienced necessarily just because young people are young, but rather because the causes of marginalisation are most concentrated in the spaces which young people fill. When thinking about interventions to enhance opportunities for young people in ways which counter their vulnerability to radical discourses, it is vital not to reinforce the narratives of Youth as Problem or Youth as Hope of the Nation by constructing a social category of 'youth' which is set apart from the rest of society. These marginalising factors are not confined to 'youth' and to suggest they are is to suggest

that broader structural questions about the characters of the political systems or their economic trajectories are not more fundamentally 'the problem'.