

YOUTH ACTIVISM IN THE SOUTH AND EAST MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES SINCE THE ARAB UPRISINGS: CHALLENGES AND POLICY OPTIONS

Beirut, 18 November 2015, Delegation of the European Union

report
from the Dialogue Workshop



REPORT No. **11**
November 2015
www.euromesco.net

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1. DETAILS OF THE FOUR SESSIONS

1.1. Chapter 1

The first contribution to the report, written by Silvia Colombo, Senior Fellow at IAI, Rome, and leading author of the Policy Study, was meant to provide the framework for analysis for the whole Policy Study by dwelling on three aspects that are linked by the conceptualization of youth as a 'narrative': a) youth exclusion and inclusion and the impact of government policies prior to the Arab uprisings; b) the articulation of youth activism, its tools, goals and modes of expression; and c) a short overview of the European Union (EU)'s youth-relevant policies in the South and East Mediterranean (SEM) countries.

The Arab upheavals in 2010-2011 that took place in several countries in the South SEM were largely depicted as expressions of youth-led activism after many years of relative calm. These events brought the Arab youth in the limelight in a dramatic way, by renewing the world's attention towards the status and the



conditions of youth in the region. In fact, most analyses of the uprisings have identified the region's exceptionally high rates of youth unemployment, and in general the unsustainable economic, political and social exclusion of youth (exacerbated by a dramatic demographic bulge) as the main causes of diffuse discontent and anger. Talks about 'marginalisation' and 'disenfranchisement', and in general about exclusion from political, social and economic opportunities have catalysed much attention. In many countries, the youth became the keyword to understand both the root causes and the dynamics of the revolution, as well as the priority of the post-revolutionary political transition. At the same time, young people have been identified as a potential engine for long-needed change in the region. However, the framing of these uprisings in the SEM countries as being youth-led rebellions has the effect of isolating youth agency from the larger society. For instance, the emphasis on youth as "revolutionary actors" largely underestimates the central role played by adults and by adult-led organizations protesting over issues that concern not only young people but the whole of society.

Almost five years have passed since those momentous events and a number of questions still remain to understand the phenomenon of youth activism in the SEM countries. In the academic and scholarly debate, most studies have focused on the youth's exclusion/inclusion at the political level by shedding light on the existing constraints and opportunities for political consciousness and participation as well as civil society engagement, whose absence has often led to alienation and even radicalisation. What is lacking in the academic as well as in the policy-oriented debates is a sound analysis of the claims, goals, forms, strategies and prospects of youth activism around socio-economic issues. All in all, the relevance of this topic is heightened by the fact that most frameworks of analysis have constructed the youth as a "problem" and a "threat" to national and regional political stability, by drawing a gloomy outlook as a result of the demographic bulge and high youth unemployment rates in the SEM countries. This contribution is meant to fill this gap by dwelling on a topic that has clear policy implications, particularly at a time in which the EU is revising its policies and cooperation instruments towards the ever-changing SEM region.

During the Q&A session, participants were unanimous in expressing their uneasiness with the concept of 'youth' itself due to the somehow restrictive meaning it conveys. They underlined that youth is a social construction and that further details should be provided to characterize this large, heterogeneous group, which overall accounts for around 70 percent of the population of the Arab world. Another point raised during the debate concerned the existence of broader, structural constraints – both at the socio-economic and the political levels – beyond the issues strictly related to youth exclusion/inclusion. This applies, for example, to the education system and programmes in most SEM countries, which are strongly linked to the opportunities (or lack thereof) for the youth on the job market.

1.2. Chapter 2

The second chapter in the report on “The Quest for Accountability and Socio-political Change in Egypt: Repertoire of Actions and Challenges for Youth Activism at the Local Level” was written by Nadine Abdalla, Research Associate at the Arab Forum for Alternatives (AFA) in Egypt and EUME Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Center of Middle Eastern and North African Politics, Free University of Berlin. The chapter aims to fill a gap in terms of the lack of research on youth movements' repertoires of actions, goals and strategies, especially in the socio-political field as well as the challenges these repertoires are facing in a continuously changing political context. In order to accomplish this objective, this contribution provides a detailed assessment of the concrete actions of three youth movements that are active at the local level in Cairo, Egypt.

The author demonstrates that in a socio-political context of generalized disappointment and increasing disengagement from socio-political activities, providing trainings for the youth to run for local elections gains a special importance as this type of elections often represents the only avenue for youth inclusion into the political system. On the one hand, raising awareness about the importance of local elections means offering the youth the possibility to interact with people's daily problems, and therefore providing them with a chance to reach the grassroots level and build a stronger social

base. On the other hand, being active at the local level facilitates the formation of youth cadres that are connected to their local communities as well as local lobbies that are able to exert pressure on the local government. Moreover, it permits the formation of a considerable social capital which can be transformed into a political capital in the future, in the local elections for example.

The debate around this contribution was very lively and it explored issues such as the leadership of the three youth movements and their accountability to the official political hierarchy; the difference between social movements, which tend to be fluid and informal, and civil society organizations, which are more structured; and finally whether the experiences discussed can represent examples of participatory democracy. In answering one of the questions during the debate, the author of the chapter specified that getting funds from external donors, e.g., the EU, could represent a problem for the youth movements themselves as they run the risk of being discredited in the eyes of their local supporters.

1.3. Chapter 3

The third contribution to the report delves into the case of Palestinian youth, with specific reference to the young generations in Gaza. The chapter was drafted by Omar Shaban, Director of Pal-Think in Gaza. The author contends that the Palestinian people in general and Palestinian youth in particular were the most excited among the Arab people about the Arab uprisings as they were hoping that it would usher in a new phase of committed leadership in the Arab countries, which would ultimately provide support to end the Israeli occupation, stop the humiliating treatment of the Palestinian people and help in the national reconciliation process. Thus, the Palestinian people – who suffer from the existence of three authorities, namely Hamas in Gaza, the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and the Israeli occupation of both areas – hurried to copy the Arab uprisings with thousands of Palestinian youth gathered in Gaza and West Bank on 15 March 2012, asking an end of the division between Hamas in Gaza and the Fatah movement in the West Bank. The paper further dwells on the reasons for the movement's failure in bringing about a fundamental change for the better.

Against this backdrop, the Palestinian youth have started to look for other options that might have better chance to change reality. While radicalisation has become an option for some of them, the majority firmly believes that the key purpose of a Palestinian youth movement should be to encourage active political participation and foster the creation of a democratic and united polity that could work towards the shared goal of a free Palestine. In particular, among the issues that a future Palestinian youth movement should start addressing are a) improving and modernizing the education system; b) holding the students' council elections in the universities; c) holding municipal elections; and d) ensuring the freedom of the youth movement itself.

The remarks made during the Q&A further underscored the specificities of the Palestinian case when it comes to the goals, tools and modes of action of the youth movement(s). In particular, a number of factors point to the extraordinary politicization of the Palestinian youth through their participation in the Intifada, which sometimes represents a burden rather than an asset for the young generations themselves.

1.4. Chapter 4

The final contribution to the Policy Study was drafted by Isabel Schäfer from the German Development Institute in Bonn on the topic of "Fostering a Youth Sensitive Approach in the EU's policies towards the South and East Mediterranean Countries – The Case of Tunisia". The chapter focuses on Tunisia, where the unemployment rates for the young generation oscillate between 20% and 40%, depending on the region. As a result of this, civil youth activism have been at the heart of the 'revolutions'. There was and still is a huge demand amongst young people for freedom and rights. Many had idealistic expectations of a rapid transformation of the country and expected immediate improvements through political and economic inclusion.

Almost five years after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, the transitional process has not met the youth activists' expectations as young people continue to be underrepresented in political decision-making bodies and their daily and socio-

economic situations have not or little changed. According to the empirical evidence collected by the author, missing professional (and thereby personal) perspectives and youth unemployment feature as important factors for the decision of a young individual to turn towards political activism, and in exceptional cases towards religious extremism (Salafism in particular), as one form of radical youth activism.

The issue of radicalization has been further discussed during the Q&A session in light of the fact that around 5,000 young Tunisians have joined the Islamic State in Syria and the country itself has suffered from the problem of terrorist attacks on its own soil. When talking about the need and strategies to foster a youth-sensitive, horizontal approach to the youth in all the EU's policies, some participants raised the point that this should not mean a fake, superficial inclusion but rather a substantive one through veritable empowerment, political participation, labour market access and mobility and education opportunities. In other words, what is needed is a new cultural/policy framework to tackle youth-related issues.



This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of European Institute of the Mediterranean and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union