

# Realizing Youth Potential in the Mediterranean: Unlocking Opportunities, Overcoming Challenges

by Francesco Paron



## ABSTRACT

In May 2018, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, in cooperation with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Compagnia di San Paolo International Affairs Programme and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, organized a New-Med conference entitled "Youth Potential in the Mediterranean. Unlocking Opportunities, Overcoming Challenges". The conference, hosted at the Italian Foreign Ministry, was structured in four sessions, each of them clustering macro-issues related to the MENA region: (1) conflict dynamics and stability; (2) energy trends; (3) civic activism; (4) economic implications and unemployment. Following a strict selection process, eight young professionals from the MENA region were invited to present their ideas on these topics.

*Middle East | North Africa | Youth | Crisis management | Energy |  
Environment | Water | Civil society | Economy | Labour market*

**keywords**

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### Introduction

The event was set up within the framework of the New-Med research network developed by IAI, a pool of Mediterranean experts and policy analysts with a special interest in the social, political, cultural and security-related dynamics in the MENA region.<sup>1</sup> On the occasion, eight young professionals were invited to present their ideas on major socio-economic and political challenges in the MENA region.<sup>2</sup> The candidate selection process was rigorous: participants were invited to submit a policy paper to critically address the impact of youth and youth-led initiatives on the aforementioned challenges and to draft policy recommendations. Contributions were evaluated by the New-Med Steering Committee.

Introductory remarks were delivered by Vinicio Mati, Coordinator for Italy's 2018 OSCE Chairmanship; Ľubica Bindová, First Secretary–Human Dimension of the Permanent Mission of the Slovak Republic to the OSCE, Vienna; and Lorenzo Kamel, IAI's Senior Fellow and New-Med's Scientific Director.

**Vinicio Mati** opened the conference, stressing that the Mediterranean dimension of the OSCE's agenda complements, and is not an alternative to, the Russian dimension. He welcomed the initiative, emphasizing that further collaboration in the Mediterranean is among the top priorities for Italy's 2018 OSCE Chairmanship, aimed at overcoming regional challenges and promote development.

<sup>1</sup> More information on the New-Med Research Network, including past events and access to publications are available from the IAI website: <http://www.iai.it/en/node/2004>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information see the speakers' bios in the IAI website <http://www.iai.it/en/node/9033>.

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· Report of the New-med conference entitled "Youth Potential in the Mediterranean. Unlocking Opportunities, Overcoming Challenges", held in Rome on 7 May 2018 and organized by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, in cooperation with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Compagnia di San Paolo International Affairs Programme and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

**Ľubica Bindová** presented the main goals of the Slovakian chairmanship as well as developments in recent meetings and roundtables. She noted that energy security, water management, interconnectivity, cyber security and education to combat radicalization are the pivotal interest areas in the Mediterranean dialogue.



Ľubica Bindová and Vinicio Mati

**Lorenzo Kamel** touched upon some of the topics of the four sessions to follow in the conference and underlined a number of ongoing trends in the region, such as the investment in solar energy in 2017 – reported to be higher than cumulative investments in coal, nuclear and gas – and the current vulnerable state of civic activism.

## Session I: Conflict dynamics

Beginning with the Oslo and Oslo II accords, **Ahmed G.S. Sukker**, addressed the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, focusing on the reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah and on the security role played by the Palestinian Authority (PA). Following the Cairo meeting in October 2017, Hamas and Fatah reached a reconciliation agreement that entailed a process aimed at restoring governing responsibilities in the Gaza Strip to the PA. In the light of divisions on both sides over the implementation of the resolution, Sukker argued that the professionalization and the reformation of the security forces is the chief way to overcome differences and achieve reconciliation. In this setting, shifting political preferences among youth in the Gaza Strip might encourage the reformation process. The presenter pointed to the new attitude towards politics among young people as the game changer. Young people are less polarized and more likely to adopt issue-related political activism, prioritizing social and economic matters as well as services provision and good governance.

The second speaker, **Bilal Sukkar**, discussed the Syrian uprisings in 2011 and the role of “youth” in such events. He first questioned the concept of youth defined as an age category and called for a different conceptualization embodying different social groups united by shared ideas (e.g., opposition to the regime’s authoritarian system). He then argued that youth-driven political alternatives will be prevented from developing in the domestic political domain as long as the regime’s authority remains strong. After the Syrian uprisings of 2011, youth movements flourished despite the repression and grim strategies adopted by the Syrian government, such as the release of Islamist ideologues, aimed at weakening youth networks. Sukkar showed that youth movements have the potential to foster progressive change and to restructure the relationships among actors based on non-violent constructive

means. Finally, he called for greater support for youth movements, both domestically (supporting emerging media initiatives that counter the regime's narrative) and internationally (promoting cross-generational mobilizing initiatives among the diaspora and cross-country cooperation among university student unions).



From left to right: Ahmed G.S. Sukker, Lorenzo Kamel, Bilal Sukkar

### Session II: Energy, environment, water

**Manar Sarie** presented an integrated analysis of the energy–water resource challenge in MENA. She argued that a second resource curse is pending, originating from a combination of factors including climate change, demographic expansion, lack of effective policies and resource mismanagement. She showed how youth-led initiatives in MENA might be successful in addressing these issues, in particular sustainable agriculture, trans-boundary watershed management and renewable energy sources (RES). However, her focus was on large, scalable and top-down interventions, which are more likely to be implemented effectively. The analysis covers the time period from 2018 to 2030, which she estimates will witness the implementation of important new technologies (in particular electric vehicles and energy storage). She then identified four interventions, two in the energy space and two in the water space respectively: (1) adoption of electric vehicles; (2) aggressive energy efficiency measures; (3) adoption of efficient reverse osmosis technologies; (4) adoption of drip irrigation for agriculture. Finally, Sarie called for a holistic approach to successfully implement these recommendations, which should take into account and alter consumers' behaviour and raise awareness.

The second speaker, **Abd Al Kareem Yehya**, proposed solar farming as a water-friendly alternative to irrigated agriculture. Water stress in the MENA region is severe. The population of the MENA region is expected to surpass that of China by the end of the century, which, coupled with renewable water scarcity and rapid depletion of groundwater, he argued, has the potential to cause a catastrophe. He analysed the water–energy–food nexus in the Bek'aa region in Lebanon and concluded that as a result of solar insolation, and the relative lack of dust and sand, solar farming would operate there at maximum efficiency. The expansion of solar farming would ensure electricity access and greatly reduce the electricity deficit, providing energy for the development of economic activities. Solar farming may be an opportunity for youth to offer concrete policy recommendations as well as providing a source of employment. Yehya identified two crucial bottlenecks: political stability in the neighbouring countries (meaning it will be unlikely to attract foreign investment) and good governance (which is fundamental for establishing a proper regulatory framework and efficient policy implementation).



### Session III: Civic activism in the MENA

**Huda Mohsin Alsahi** dealt with the issue of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia following the royal decree of June 2018; in particular, she examined the peculiarities of Saudi Arabia's narrative reform under Crown Prince Salman. Drawing from Sardenberg's conceptualization of women's empowerment, she maintained that recent reforms



Conference speakers

resemble the "liberal empowerment" approach, aimed at promoting development and neoliberal policies, rather than the "liberating empowerment" approach, which would entail a genuine process by which women would attain autonomy and self-determination. Defining it as a top-down, diluted empowerment, Alsahi interpreted recent reforms as enabling factors. She then recommended the adoption of a new family code, the abolishment of gender segregation in the workplace and the establishment of independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at national and local levels to further promote and continue along the path of women's empowerment.

The second speaker, **Tasnim Abderrahim**, analysed the trend of mounting disenchantment with political activism among youth in Tunisia, its implications for the ongoing decentralization process and opportunities for greater political inclusion and youth engagement. Surveys reveal that only 23 per cent of the population aged between 18 and 34 had trust in government in 2016. Worsening economic conditions and decreasing youth participation in institutionalized forms of activism together with a certain degree of pessimism have been alienating young people from the public sphere. Still, youth movements remain active on the street and in unstructured forms of activism. Abderrahim maintained that further alienation may be detrimental to democracy, specifically in terms of current reforms aimed at decentralization. The government should make more effort to promote youth participation in local governance and tackle real issues, such as services provision and unemployment. Equally important are initiatives to engage with educational institutions and training programmes to facilitate debate between citizens and local councils.

### Session IV: Economic implications and challenges

**Fatma Khattab Eldesouky** analysed the issue of unemployment in Egypt, in particular the role of youth and of development players in the economy in overcoming challenges within the labour market. Her study covers the period 2010 to 2018. The top priorities of the government are to promote the social protection

net and to increase the human development budgetary plan. She explained that the major challenges facing the Egyptian economy are to keep up with population growth rates and to address global market needs. Government restrictions on NGOs and civil society organizations inhibit youth participation in any effective means of decision-making. Eldesouky estimated that the overall impact of development efforts for employment from 2010 to 2016 involved 1 billion dollars, providing about 20,000 employment opportunities. Key steps to improve the situation include additional training to provide small and medium-sized enterprises with a skilled labour force to boost competition on international markets, a more transparent and inclusive civil society, and a system of monitoring and accountability to identify potential areas of intervention.



From left to right: Ettore Greco, Riccardo Pozzi, Armando Barucco, Charlotte Brandsma

The last speaker, **Semuhi Sinanoğlu**, examined the interplay and economic implications for the labour market of two parallel trends looming in the MENA region: (1) worsening rates of youth unemployment; (2) the arrival of the fourth industrial revolution. The MENA region already has the highest youth unemployment rates in the world (29.6 per cent), and it will face further challenges in the wake of disruptive innovation, namely automation and robotics, 3D printing, artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things. The key issues to be addressed include skills development and mismatch, the widening gender gap in the labour force and public employment. The speaker suggested that governments should pursue micro-targeted interventions given the social and economic diversity in the region. Moreover, he envisaged purchasing power parity (PPP) promotion as a tool to attract investment for non-oil-rich countries as well as to tackle skyrocketing rates of public employment. Finally, he presented the Canadian Youth Corps project as a possible model to bolster youth employment as an alternative to entrepreneurship-based approaches.

### Concluding remarks

**Armando Barucco**, Director of the Policy Planning Unit at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, emphasized how the prosperity, stability and security of the MENA region are pivotal to Italy's foreign policy and to the development of a prosperous society in the region. He pointed out that the top priority is to address the extreme volatility characterizing the region. In particular, it is crucial to focus on how to reconcile democracy, prosperity and security in the face of disruptive technological innovation, inequality and the crisis of political Islam.

**Charlotte Brandsma**, Mediterranean Policy Programme Officer at The German Marshall Fund of the United States, stressed the importance of the MENA region to both the USA and Europe. She then underlined the valuable contributions of all the speakers and the need for diverse perspectives to better advise policymakers on regional issues.

**Riccardo Pozzi**, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Youth and Security, highlighted that, while they may be politically disengaged and face challenges ahead, youth should take advantage of the new opportunities afforded by technological developments such as AI. Indeed, demand for experts and highly educated personnel in fast-developing industries is on the rise, said Pozzi. He concluded by calling for young people to further commit to shaping a better future.

**Ettore Greco**, IAI's Executive Vice-President, contended that besides the wide spectrum of topics discussed, the interaction between technological, economic, and social changes and political developments was indeed the leitmotiv of the conference. Further efforts are needed to frame all these issues in a common political scenario, and to reflect on whether short-term or long-term strategies are more effective to address the issues facing the MENA region. Indeed, technological innovation will be a crucial driver for prospective social and economic changes.

*Updated 22 June 2018*

## Conference Programme

Rome, 7 May 2018

### Opening Session

#### *Welcome Remarks*

**Vinicio Mati**, Coordinator for Italy's 2018 OSCE Chairmanship, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Rome

**Ľubica Bindová**, First Secretary-Human Dimension, Permanent Mission of the Slovak Republic to the OSCE, Vienna

**Lorenzo Kamel**, Senior Fellow, IAI & Senior Lecturer, University of Bologna

### Session I

#### *Conflict Dynamics*

Threat perceptions have risen as a result of the many conflicts and civil wars taking place across the MENA. In this scenario, there is a growing risk of losing sight of the underlining causes of the 2010-2011 Arab uprisings, moving back to old paradigms that prioritize stability and economic gain over the goal of sustainable development, inclusive growth and political representation. Speakers in the first session analyze the implications of these and a number of other related aspects, devoting a particular attention to the marginalization of youth initiatives in the Syrian context, and the professionalization of security apparatus in the Gaza strip.

Chair and Discussant **Mark Le Vine**, Director of Global Middle East Studies, School of Humanities, University of California, Irvine

Panelists **Ahmed G.S. Sukker**, Palestine  
**Bilal Sukkar**, Syria

### Session II

#### *Energy, Environment, Water*

Environmental degradation, water scarcity and an overreliance on hydrocarbons represent considerable challenges to sustainable development across the MENA. Lukewarm economic growth, demographic pressures and declining state capacity are further weakening the ability of MENA states to respond to these challenges and plan for climate change and the post-oil future. This session address the contrasting trends of resource abundance and scarcity in the MENA, assessing their impact on the developmental and governance models in the region. Recommendations for a gradual transition to more sustainable forms of development and energy production, through solar, wind and other forms of renewable energy, will be addressed in light of their feasibility in providing new solutions to old challenges in the region.

Chair and Discussant **Houda Ben Jannet Allal**, General Director, Observatoire Méditerranéen de l'Énergie (OME), Paris

Panelists **Manar Sarie**, Israel  
**Abed Al Kareem Yehya**, Lebanon



### Session III

#### *Civic Activism in the MENA*

In the face of the political and socio-economic challenges, youth in the MENA are actively demanding increased freedoms and opportunities, engaging in innovative forms of civic activism often at great personal risk. Women's movements rallying for equal rights, opportunities and inclusion are becoming increasingly visible. The third session focus on these issues, paying specific attention to the use of social media by women's movements in the Arab Gulf States, and youth-led initiatives aimed at promoting youth participation in local governance in Tunisia.

Chair and Discussant **Diego Brasioli**, Director for the Mediterranean and Middle East, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Rome

Panelists **Huda Mohsin Alsahi**, Bahrain  
**Tasnim Abderrahim**, Tunisia

### Session IV

#### *Economic Implications and Challenges*

Young people between the ages of 15 and 29 are the single largest and fastest expanding demographic group in the MENA. High unemployment rates, lack of affordable housing, a mismatch between educational attainment and job prospects and unequal opportunities for migration and mobility are among the most pressing challenges hampering the self-development of youth in the Mediterranean and broader MENA region. Session four problematize each of these aspects, paying special attention to the economic and political reasons behind the current status of the labor market in Egypt, and the current policy approaches towards the displaced Syrians in the Mediterranean countries and their socioeconomic integration.

Chair and Discussant **Tareq Baconi**, Policy Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), London

Panelists **Semuhi Sinanoğlu**, Turkey  
**Fatma Khattab Eldesouky**, Egypt

### Concluding Remarks

**Armando Barucco**, Director of the Policy Planning Unit, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Rome  
**Charlotte Brandsma**, Mediterranean Policy Programme Officer, The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), Brussels  
**Riccardo Pozzi**, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Youth and Security, Vienna  
**Ettore Greco**, Executive Vice-President, IAI, Rome

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### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, IAI does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), two book series (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

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