

Coping with Uncertainty: Young People in the Middle East and North Africa

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's MENA Youth Study

In 2016/2017, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung conducted a large-scale representative survey of youths and young adults in eight countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Encompassing around 9,000 young people between 16 and 30 from Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia, the results offer fascinating insights into their attitudes to life, self-image and perceptions of the future.

The survey results reveal the uncertainties confronting young people from the region in many realms. However, faced with these imperatives, young people find ways to cope with difficult circumstances and discover their own solutions to make headway. Many of them look to the future with confidence, despite major economic upheavals and scant scope for political participation, as well as violence, war, poverty and hunger in some countries.

Young People in the MENA Region

In the wake of the Arab Spring, political and societal transformation processes emerged in many countries in the region, at times taking very different forms, and with consequences that remain difficult to predict. Politically and economically marginalized, young people, who are not taken seriously by political decision-makers, played a central role in these developments.

In many places across the MENA region, young people continue to demand equal access to politics and equal scope to participate in society. In the public sphere, they do not merely seek to ensure their interests are taken seriously, but are also prepared to shoulder responsibility for themselves and for society. However, they repeatedly encounter obstacles and resistance when asserting these demands.

The above-average proportion of young people in societies across the MENA region makes it vital to integrate young people politically and economically, and to develop more inclusive societal models in order to achieve or maintain stability in these societies. The impact of interactions between political and economic uncertainty makes

integrating young people more difficult in many countries in the region. In many places, it has proved impossible to fully implement the desired societal changes.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung views young people as a decisive factor for democratic development in the region and is keen to strengthen their potential to initiate change in the world of politics and across society. Based on the results presented here, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung seeks to foster engagement with young people's situation in the MENA region.

Central Results of the FES MENA Youth Study

1. Young people want security, a good standard of living and good family relationships

Young people and young adults in the MENA region above all want:

- law, order and security
- a decent standard of living / decent jobs
- trusting relationships with their partners and families

Young people's values are shaped by a sense of community, a focus on success, a yearning for freedom, and strong morals. Individual manifestations of these values are complex, as are the realities of the situations facing young people, whose life histories are frequently characterised by discontinuities due to their experiences of war and violence.

Many of these young people derive confidence from unconditional trust in God, which is viewed as a highly personal matter.

2. Religiosity is increasing, but is practiced above all on an individual level

Generally speaking, increased religiosity often emerges only after young people have finished school. It can be identified above all in large cities, and among prosperous and well-educated social groups. Less religious young people, in contrast, tend to come from families with low levels of education, from the lower middle classes and/or poorer strata of society.

For young people, religion is linked not so much to political or ideological ends, but above all to a sense of individual well-being and self-discipline. It is increasingly perceived as a vector for spirituality rather than an expression of ideology or politics. Young people are becoming more devout, above all on an individual level, and not so much within the context of a collective social utopia.

3. The family is the most important source of security and point of reference

Due to enormous erosion of employment security, the family is becoming increasingly important as a social and economic fall-back system.

The young people surveyed are keen to have strong family ties. They place great importance on their children, and would change little about their own upbringing.

Particular importance is given to choosing one's own spouse.

4. Young people face enormous economic problems and scant scope for upward mobility

Young people are affected by three dynamics:

- a massive drop in employment security,
- growing economic polarisation
- promises that education offers a route to employment have not been kept.

The Arab middle class, an important factor for decades, is now disintegrating in the wake of decades of neo-liberal economic policy.

Even with significantly improved education, social advancement has become a distant prospect for many. Instead, the loss of jobs in the public sector goes hand-in-hand with the erosion of public welfare provision:

- Only one-third of young people are in employment (excluding school pupils and students).
- Two-thirds of young people work only on a temporary basis or not at all.
- Almost half of those in work are in insecure employment.

Young families face enormous economic problems:

- Around half of young men who already head a household consider their family's economic situation to be "rather bad" and "very bad".
- Breaking away from their family is virtually inconceivable for this generation, as hardly any other institution provides a safety net in the face of economic insecurity.
- The social process of ever-diminishing security thus turns into a permanent state, and precarity becomes omnipresent.

5. Less than ten percent of the young people surveyed want to emigrate

Only a small group (less than ten percent of interviewees) is firmly resolved to emigrate. Contributory factors include scope for virtual mobility on the Internet, more restrictive border controls in many countries, and the high cost of migration.

Due to their precarious situation, the young people in question are however often torn between temporarily considering emigration and their profound ties with their home

countries and families. In this context, emigration is by no manner of means viewed as an "easy way out".

Labour migration occurs first and foremost within the Arab world. It is however also shaped by historical connections, in other words by colonial and linguistic connections.

Frequent enforced immobility in host countries means that new uncertainties are a decisive factor in daily life, even for young people affected by forced displacement.

6. Communication media are used above all for private purposes

Media use is converging globally. The technologies and formats found in Arab countries are the same as those prevalent elsewhere. However, a shift in media utilisation can be identified due to both long-standing distrust of the media and the recent emergence of a heightened tendency for young people to withdraw from day-to-day politics.

New media are increasingly used for private communications, in particular to nurture social networks. In this context, smartphones play an unparalleled role in enabling Internet access, which helps young people to stay in touch with friends and relatives, as well as exchanging digital products such as music and images.

At the same time, traditional mass media, although often state-controlled, are still present, and continue to play a crucial role for those young people who have only limited access to digital media.

7. Youths and young adults distance themselves from politics

The 2011 uprisings demonstrate the potential impact arising from politicisation of the youthful populations of MENA countries, where there is often a dearth of political openness.

In the wake of experiences in recent years, a large majority of the youths and young adults surveyed have distanced themselves from politics, and emphasise their lack of interest in politics. This stance often relates to party politics, for at the same time these young people are interested in and engage with in other domains.

Many young people would like to see the state playing a more active role. This pertains first and foremost to social security; young people feel this should be provided to a greater extent by the state, given the backdrop of increasing insecurity on many fronts.

There is considerable potential amongst young people to trigger constructive changes in the political order in the future.

8. Many young people are prepared to engage with social and societal issues

Political mobilisation by young people to change the relationship between the state and society reached its highest levels in the 2010/11 events. In many cases, questions have subsequently been raised about the extent to which young people can be agents for change.

- Despite widespread disillusionment with formal political processes over the last few years, young people are still willing to play an active role and to become involved.
- However, the areas in which they are active have shifted: rather than political transformation, socio-economic goals have become their main focus.

Generally speaking, both young people who are politically active and those who do not play an active role are interested above all in securing their basic needs and an environment free from violence, and place less emphasis on political freedom or civil liberties, including minority rights.

9. Active involvement with social issues largely occurs outside institutions

Young people in the MENA region are prepared to champion issues that affect others or commit themselves to advocating certain goals or topics. However, on the whole this type of active involvement does not occur within the context of formal civil-society organisations, such as school or student groups, youth organisations, associations, religious institutions, political parties or trade unions; only a third of politically active young people take action through such organisations.

- More affluent young people tend to become actively involved more frequently than their less wealthy peers.
- Limited involvement within the framework of civil-society organisations is more typical of lower-class and middle-class young people.
- Members of civil-society organisations report that they feel pessimistic and insecure more frequently than other young people.

Changes in young people's values and goals mean that civil institutions are often less attractive than for previous generations; this is also largely because the state often has a strong hold on such institutions, controlling and co-opting them.

10. Nevertheless: most young people are confident about the future

While the political and economic situation in countries in the MENA region currently offers few grounds for optimism, the study results present a picture of young people who are better educated than ever before, with strong emotional ties to their home

countries and a positive attitude to life, prepared to shoulder responsibility and become actively involved in addressing societal issues.

Publication of the results:

Zwischen Ungewissheit und Zuversicht. Jugend im Nahen Osten und in Nordafrika

Published for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung by Jörg Gertel and Ralf Hexel
Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachf., Bonn 2017
ISBN 978-3-8012-0513-3

Coping with Uncertainty. Youth in the Middle East and North Africa

Edited by Jörg Gertel and Ralf Hexel
Saqi Books, London 2018
ISBN 978-0-8635-6960-9

The Arabic edition of the FES MENA Youth Study will be published in summer 2018 by Dar al-Saqi in Beirut.

The regional and country-specific data and analyses can be consulted at:
<http://www.fes.de/lnk/youth-study>.