

The Politics and Agency of Youth in the Southern Mediterranean

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The Euro Mediterranean partnership has been an ongoing effort by the European Union to engage with the Southern Mediterranean (SEM) through different partnership initiatives in social, security, and cultural affairs. At the heart of this partnership lies the importance of regional cooperation, in addition to advancing political and economic reforms through linking it to financial and technical assistance. This partnership has been established to develop mutual growth moving beyond the traditional implementation of development assistance programs. Promoting democracy and Human rights has been an integral part of the European Union (EU) policy toward the Southern Mediterranean. Young people have been a key constituency in this partnership, ranging from the restructuring of the Southern Mediterranean youth labour force, to building a link between the different partners in the North and South of the Mediterranean [1]. However, security and stability have always taken precedence over human rights and democracy prior to the 2010/11 Arab Uprisings. In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, EU policy makers have recognized that previously adopted policies favouring stability and cooperation with authoritarian elites were 'errors from the past' [2].

The Euro Mediterranean partnership initiative in general and youth policies in particular

have developed within the context of the global securitization of development, in which the political environment is continuously overwhelmed with security concerns and challenges of development [3]. Though the EU has officially renounced its preference for autocratic stability over democratic governance in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, there has been an upsurge in the securitization preference a decade after the Uprisings, especially toward youth policies. The EU's main approach to its southern neighbours has been driven from the perspective of "conflicts, instability and insecurity" which have "complicated cooperation and even necessitated military involvement; while coping with growing refugee and migrant-flows as well as radicalization and terrorism" [4].

The Securitization of development, in addition to linking it to the discourse of stability and socio-economic reform, have worked at the expense of young people's political rights and freedoms. The social imaginaries and policy frames concerning young people were created in such a way, that the policy discourse described youth as "a political and security threat, a social and economic burden" [5].

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Within this context, this article seeks to analyse the impact of youth policies, on young people living in the region today. What is the impact of a decade of increased securitization of development on young people today? While the discourse on young people remains centred at how young people pose a burden and a threat to their regime's stability, this article argues that young people themselves are the victims of decades of securitization, bad governance, corruption, and market dynamics that have added to their vulnerabilities and precarities. Without addressing the root causes of these youth insecurities and vulnerabilities, stability in the SEM countries will remain a mirage.

Economic burden or youth Precarities?

Young people have been largely perceived as an economic burden with a narrative focusing on the youth bulge being the main reason for growing unemployment in the SEM. Unemployment in return is believed to be the main driver for youth discontent and destabilization of the region. The main policy solution for this, as advanced by the SEM regimes, by international donors, and by the EU has been to develop employment opportunities, develop the market for more business start-ups and increase youth entrepreneurship as a measure to eliminate unemployment and add security and stability to the region. Though unemployment is problematic, it seems that this is more related to the structure of the market itself, the growing corruption associated with business elites, the lack of employment opportunities from the private sector, and also the dearth of secure job opportunities. According to a study entitled POWER2YOUTH (P2Y), which relied on

qualitative and quantitative analysis of young people in six SEM countries, (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Palestine, Turkey and Lebanon), and was conducted between 2015 until 2016, there is indeed a problem of school-to-work transitions, and high unemployment problem compared to other regions of the world. However, the main characteristic of young people in the region is not unemployment per se, it is rather “insecurity”. According to Emma Murphy:

«Insecurity pervades all dimensions of a young person’s life – economic, political, social, physical (even existential) and ontological. It is particularly pronounced for young women, although again every individual’s experiences differ and reflects the composition of their intersected identities. In degree and multi-dimensionality, it is frequently sufficient such that apparently life-threatening mass migration or recruitment into radical political groups become normalized options» [6].

Similarly, another youth study which was conducted in 2016 in nine MENA countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, Bahrain, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen and Syrian refugees) [7], found that when comparing young people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), not only with other young people in the world, but also with their own parents, they are:

«Affected by three dynamics: lack of job security, growing economic polarization, and the failure of educational promise.... Today, only one-third of young people (pupils and students excluded) work in any capacity; all others are temporarily or even permanently without work. Even then, nearly one-half of this labour force is precariously employed... Insecurity hence becomes a chronic condition, with precariousness omnipresent» [8].

Material insecurities which are a result of the precarious employment in which young people live are increased by the political and physical insecurities that are generated by increasingly authoritarian regimes, that are supported by the international community and the EU. Even for young people who are already employed, employment itself is characterized by increasing precarities, which means the lack of job security at large. Data from P2Y for instance demonstrate that since youth unemployment and underemployment in the formal labour markets have increased, young people have flocked to the informal economy, which has rapidly expanded during the past two decades. According to the World Bank estimates in 2011, the informal economies in the MENA produce almost 27 percent of their respective GDP and employ almost 67 percent of the whole labour force [9].

Young people themselves perceive the private sector very negatively. For instance, young people in Morocco have argued that the working conditions in the private sector do not correspond with the labour laws of their countries. The Moroccan labour code stipulates that there should be a provisional two-year contract for workers, however, the private sector does not respect this code. Similarly, in Egypt, the private sector employs educated young people with low salaries and no access to any labour rights or job security [10]. «The material insecurities created by precarious employment are compounded by political and physical insecurities generated by authoritarian (or at best non-democratic) regimes, the latter drawing on conservative sociocultural constructions to legitimize the subordination of youth» [11].

Young people believe that unemployment is more associated with corruption and bad governance, than by the lack of employment opportunities per se. For instance, according to the 2020 Arab Youth survey, the majority of youth in the region, are indeed concerned about unemployment (87%), however, the majority of them do not believe that their governments are able to deal with this issue, not for the lack of policy initiatives, but due to corruption and bad governance.

Many young people have argued that, finding a job is dependent mainly on their own networks, mainly their relatives and friends. For instance, 48.5 percent of young people in Egypt and 33 percent in Palestine argue that they depend on family and friends in finding employment. Hence, a “wasta” is essential for obtaining a job, without having access to this social network, finding employment is believed to be very hard. The lack of access to networks of power, or to the private sector networks of power, makes young people in the SEM vulnerable to precarisation. The P2Y survey also asked young people for the reasons of their unemployment, a large percentage of respondents argued that they did not find “appropriate” jobs [12].

Youth precariousness and insecurities are related to political mobilization. Young people tend to mobilize when they feel that their security of basic needs is threatened

Government policies have also been geared at promoting small business start-ups and entrepreneurship. The problem however, is that many young people do not see this as a solution to their economic and employment hardships, they believe that it actually adds to their job insecurity and psychological stress. In Egypt for instance, young people who have established their own start-ups have argued that compared to their peers who work in the private or public sector, they feel more insecure, and fear that their companies would fail at any time. Incidentally, young people have also argued that while the Egyptian government encourages business start-ups amongst urban educated young people, it develops constraints for rural and poor young people who live in informal settlements to establish their own small business initiatives. For instance, the Egyptian government cracks down on street vendors, and abolishes the majority of kiosks and small services organizations, which

have no government permits, but does not help these young people to receive permits either.

Civic and Political Participation

After the Arab Uprisings, the EU developed new initiatives, prioritizing youth inclusion in public policy in the SEM. For instance, in 2013, it revised its 2009 Youth Policy Manual to specifically cater for its Arab southern neighbours. The EU also funded a new NET-MED for the European Neighbourhood policy to help in the young people's capacity building and to promote their civic and political engagement [13]. Even though these initiatives are important for engaging youth in the political process, sometimes there are adverse effects. For instance, in Tunisia and in Palestine, young people have reported that these youth policies help in de-politicizing youth, instead of making them more engaged. An NGOization process has taken place, where many young people have worked in and developed new NGOs to promote EU development agenda, while neglecting the basic needs of their own population and stakeholders.

Youth policies whether advanced by SEM regimes or in cooperation with the EU, do not address youth insecurities and precarities. For instance, different policy initiatives do not address the fact that young women are exposed to sexual harassments, or that young people in Palestine for instance face violence while conducting normal activities other youth in the globe do, like going to university, or the fact that young activists are detained and arrested for simply voicing their opinions [14].

Youth precarities and insecurities are related to political mobilization. Young people tend to mobilize when they feel that their security of basic needs is threatened. «The less secure a young person feels, the more likely he or she is to mobilise...Moreover, there are indications that where youth have been directly touched by violence, they are more likely to mobilize than where they have not» [15]. For them, the security of basic needs is of major concern and followed by the absence of violence. Corruption and bad governance in the region, are believed to be the main reasons for unrest in the Arab world. Youth perceive these insecurities and socio-economic problems as a direct consequence of their regimes' failure to address these issues. Youth in the region are aware of the importance of good governance and the rule of law, while they also perceive a discrepancy between what should be and what actually is happening within their regimes. For instance, when asked about their satisfaction with the governance process, young people were very dissatisfied, ranging from 80 percent in Lebanon, to 76 percent in Tunisia to 66 percent in the Palestinian territories, to 45 percent in Turkey. Morocco is the only exception, with 15 percent dissatisfaction rate [16].

Migration an Answer to Youth Precarities?

Given the precarities, violence and perception of bad governance, market un-competitiveness and corruption, that young people are experiencing in the SEM, it is of no surprise to find them interested in migration. Nevertheless, according to Gertel and

Wagner, only 10 percent of young people from the MENA are actually interested in permanent migration. The majority wants to migrate only temporarily to find a job and then return back to their countries of origin. In addition, their most preferred destination of migration is to the Gulf. According to the Arab youth survey, 24 percent of young people in the Arab world want to migrate for economic reasons, while 16 percent want to due to corruption. Nevertheless, others have argued that living a dignified life, where they would not be subjected to human rights abuses and individual security threats for saying their own opinions. Hence, young people in the SEM prefer circular migration, to permanent migration. They want to hold on to their family values, traditions and place of residence, they perceive migration to be only the last resort for finding more secure jobs to help finance their families in their countries of origin [17].

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Looking at the numbers of irregular migrants and their peak in 2015-16, the EU is focusing more on integrating these young migrants in Europe than on how to provide more opportunities for migration for development and circular migration. In its New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the European commission wants to adopt new policies to regulate migration through preventing conflict in developing countries, and promoting security and good governance. In addition, it portrays the fact that its trade and investment policies have already contributed to the root causes of developing employment opportunities for young people in the south. It wants to also boost investment through an External Investment Plan to help in the economic development and employment opportunities of its southern neighbours. Education and research skills are also top priorities for the new EU policies. These policies are to be utilized by the EU for the development of its partnerships with developing countries [18]. The extent to which these policies would be implemented is still to be seen, however, the root causes of migration like exposure to violence and job insecurities need to also be addressed by this new policy initiative. The initiative also takes for granted the fact that migrants want to permanently reside in Europe, whereas this is not necessarily the case.

Conclusion

The Euro Mediterranean partnership developed new policies, and new policy discourses for young people in the SEM and in the MENA through drawing on Europe's own languages and understanding of securitization and development. It also provided new avenues for networks, funding and opportunities for the creation of youth NGOs, and associations to establish grassroots development assistance. Its last initiative is to target good governance and an External Investment Plan to mitigate migration and help in finding employment

opportunities for young people in the SEM. While, the implementation of these policies remains hard to attain due to the broader structural problems in the region, the root causes of youth precariousities and insecurities remain, and are even exacerbated with the continuation of civil wars and violence in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic that is causing more social and economic hardships. Job insecurities, the closure of the market to only a few “connected” young people, and the structural economic and political problems in the region remain the same. To help advance stable polities in the long run, young people’s insecurities, precariousities and exposure to violence should be addressed and targeted through new development initiatives, that go beyond the securitization and development paradigm. These new initiatives should address the root causes of young people’s exclusion from the economic, social and political spheres. They should also look at young people as victims of violence, exclusion and insecurities, rather than as causes of security threats and instability.

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