

The First Annual Middle East Student/Young Regional Conference  
**“Reassessing beliefs and belief systems”**

*24-26 November 2016*

Nicosia, Cyprus

Hosted by

**The University of Nicosia**

## **Conference Report**

### **What future for the youth in the MENA region?**

Almost six years after the start of the Arab Spring, young people remain excluded from political dialogue and transnational discussions to promote understanding and problem-solving. Security risks, travel restrictions, and unchallenged beliefs and belief systems help perpetuate entrenched patterns of behaviour across the MENA region, which often developed in disconnect from others.

Insecurity and corruption in the MENA region deprive young people of economic opportunities and hope. Around 60% of the MENA region's population is under 25. Nevertheless, the youth have little influence on political decision-making processes and also limited access to jobs. The wave of protests during the Arab Spring which was followed by promises for reform has hardly led to concrete and positive change. The endless conflicts throughout the Middle East have made the region's youth vulnerable to violent and extremist beliefs. It is time for young citizens of the region to get connected and involved in the issues that will decide their future.

### **A conference to initiate change**

In defiance of security risks and travel barriers, the DCAF-ISYP First Annual Middle East Student/Young Regional Conference brought together over 35 young academics, entrepreneurs and professionals working in national parliament and government, media organisations, international organisations, think tanks and NGOs. Participants came from over 20 nationalities majorly from across the MENA region, from Tunisia to Iran, from Sudan to Turkey, and also from Europe and the United States. Some have never had contact with one another. To avoid any risks for the participants and ensure open and direct discussions, Chatham House rules and a no photo rules were strictly applied.

The conference's purpose was to initiate a process which engages influential young people from the MENA region to collaboratively develop solutions and tools to address these challenges. All participants of the conference were able to make presentations based on the topic of their choice and the specified guiding questions. Subsequently, they explored what they can do in their countries and across borders to promote positive change by challenging

the beliefs and beliefs systems which sustain violence and thwart reform efforts in the MENA region.

The conference:

- **provided a neutral environment** for the participants. This enabled them to openly engage with each other, exchange and challenge ideas and beliefs, and explore solutions while maintaining a respectful conduct with each other;
- engaged participants in structured discussions around key themes and **challenged key (mis)perceptions and beliefs**;
- **facilitated awareness and discussions** on regional security in the MENA region.

The conference contributed towards developing innovative and self-sustained initiatives run by youth for youth and creating a network of young people across the region who continue to be ambassadors of change and challenge others to reassess the beliefs and belief systems of their generation.

## Summary of the sessions: main outcomes

The conference featured structured panel discussions on four topics linked to security issues in the Middle East. The panel discussions allowed for an interactive dialogue between the panellists and the audience. They were followed by focused working group discussions which are described thereafter.

### I. The Arab Spring five years on: country experiences from participants

Discussions on the Arab Spring brought out the differences experiences across the region. Whereas some countries have seen bottom-up social movements, the Yemeni experience was described as an elitarian process, largely disconnected from citizens. Speakers emphasised that although each country is subject to a very different context, civil society plays an important role in challenging belief systems. Civil society is often subject to authoritarian repression in the MENA region, social media and the virtual space they provide are a way to circumvent censorship and pressure. Moreover, it was outlined that a distinction should be made between civil society organisations and civil society itself. While the former often claim to represent the latter, the latter is often fragmented; a crucial issue which needs to be addressed to reduce societal fragmentation.

### II. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: what options for a new reality?

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, participants were challenged to explore options for a new reality that might open opportunities for current and future generations. The problem of isolation on both sides was highlighted: both Israelis and Palestinians are subject to pervasive narratives that condition the possibilities of change. Without platforms for engagement and significant systematic support, the narratives adopted by previous generation(s) will not be challenged. Several participants emphasised that asymmetries between conflicting parties must be addressed before there can be meaningful dialogue.

### III. Radicalism and violent extremism: reasons and possible solutions

In dissecting the many reasons for radicalisation, there was a clear consensus that different processes of marginalisation were at the root. Economic and political disenfranchisement has been pushing mostly young men to seek ideological alternatives to the status quo of (authoritarian) governmental control. However, participants were careful to point out that not all radicalism leads to violence and that in each case context plays an integral role. In this spirit, it was pointed out that radicalism and extremism are not unique to Islam – there is a

widespread narrative (partially driven by media) that ignores the many kinds of violent extremism across the world, not even exclusive to religion.

## **VI. Forced migration and refugees: economic, political, security considerations**

The session on “Forced migration and refugees” touched upon various issues, however, all centred on the reoccurring theme of integration. The main conclusion can be summarised in the idea of reciprocal commitment. Host communities must adopt a culture of welcome towards refugees. Integration is often blocked by institutional, but most importantly by cultural, barriers based on negative beliefs about refugees and immigrants more generally. At the same time, immigrants must demonstrate the commitment to integrate into the host societies. To facilitate both sides’ processes, belief systems need to be changed, while swift economic integration could be the key.

### **Five concrete proposals towards change**

Every session was followed by a focused working group session during which participants discussed practical projects for each of the topics discussed. Project ideas were submitted before the conference, and the furthest developed ideas were selected for a detailed discussion. This gave participants the opportunity to test their projects ideas and to add further details towards several strong proposals:

- **Youth training in political participation programme: *Empower marginalised youth to become involved politically in their communities.***
- **A code of conduct: *Declaration of principles governing the inter-institutional relations and mitigates power struggles through a framework built on integrity and mutual cooperation.***
- **Towards a balanced understanding of today’s “Islam Crisis” and challenging the mainstream: *Engaging young people from all over the world in an online platform to discuss and debate political Islam.***
- **Connect.Me – A different path: *Scholarship programme for Palestinian students to study in Israeli universities.***
- **Econergees: *Manpower centres which serve as a liaison between the labour market and immigrants seeking work.***

*Further details can be shared upon request*

During the follow-up of the conference, working groups will be set up which will further work on the proposals to develop achievable projects.

### **Conclusion: the start of a process**

The conference provided a unique and very rare opportunity for a broad range of students and young professionals from various countries of the Middle East and North Africa to engage in an open, respectful and productive dialogue.

The MENA region is dominated by fear and distrust which limits the possibilities for exchange between people from neighbouring countries. Also, all MENA countries suffer from

impediments to change and joint initiatives due to the existing administrative and social structures.

During the conference, participants were able to develop an understanding of each other's narrative and discourse. Many participants highlighted the importance of mobility and connectedness while most agree that a platform can be established via academic institutions which can lead to a change in beliefs and belief systems. Moreover, some participants stressed on the urgency of going beyond political blockages and initiate institution-building and reform processes to get rid of the structures which sustain the beliefs which impede positive change.

The conference did not only feature some very insightful discussions but also produced a wide range of creative and innovative solutions to challenging beliefs and belief systems in the region. The presented projects pay testament to the high level of engagement of all participants and their willingness to cooperate to tackle current challenges and to collaborate in the process of reassessing beliefs and belief systems.