ISYP
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Conference Report

Introduction
What future for cooperation among youth in the MENA region?

At least every third citizen of the MENA population is between the ages of 15 and 29. And yet, while the MENA region sees hardly any transnational discussions to promote understanding and problem-solving, the few meetings that do take place seldom involve young participants. Security risks, travel restrictions, and unchallenged mindsets and beliefs help perpetuate entrenched patterns of behavior across the MENA region, which often developed in disconnect from others. Irresponsible governments and political or religious leaders can propagate and utilize beliefs, especially among the younger population, creating sectarian divisions, ethnic hatred, and religious intolerance that fuels conflict and in service of narrow political interests.

Youth from across the region seek security, good education, economic opportunities and freedom of expression. Despite their desire to stay, many tend to leave their home countries because they find it difficult and are not enabled to work and contribute to the development of their communities. The youth in the Middle East are striving for change and are willing to actively and collaboratively contribute to the promotion of tolerance, democracy, economic growth and good education. However, they are still unable to find venues in which they can freely express themselves and work together to tackle the common issues which hinder their prospects for development and stability.

The Middle East Student/Young Conference Series
Challenging beliefs and belief systems

It is time to engage young leaders and enable them to shape their own future. The Middle East Student/Young Conference Series "Challenging beliefs and belief systems" provides a unique and rare opportunity for a broad range of students and young professional from across the MENA region to engage in an open, respectful and productive dialogue. It provides a forum for young leaders from the region to critically assess beliefs and belief systems, identify elements which may lead to conflict and work collaboratively in finding practical solutions to the many issues and challenges the region faces today.

The Second Annual Middle East Student/Young Regional Conference

Narratives of Change: Cooperation and Partnerships among Communities in the MENA Region

The objective of holding the second conference was to reinforce the message that young people should not be constrained by the existing beliefs and political orientations of the older generation. Asking how it is possible to change the region by challenging beliefs, the conference provided an opportunity for both past and new participants to exchange ideas on issues of common interest in the region and identify possibilities for cooperation and partnerships to tackle them. 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 collaboratively;
- 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.

In line with its objective of producing concrete and practical solutions, the conference encouraged participants to 1) showcase existing initiatives and ideas; 2) develop and identify new ones; and finally 3) establish a network of young leaders to promote them.

Summary of the sessions: main outcomes

The conference featured facilitated presentations and discussions on three main topics linked to security issues in the Middle East. The discussions allowed for an interactive dialogue between the presenters and the participants. They were followed by working group discussions in which participants came together to identify common problems and challenges, reassess their related beliefs and opinions, and collaboratively develop practical project ideas which contribute towards positive change.

I. The evolution of the political and economic context in the Middle East since the Arab Spring

Under this topic, presentations and discussions focused on the evolution of the political and economic situation in the different Middle East countries, especially since the Arab Spring. This provided the opportunity to identify participants' perceptions on the outcomes of the Arab Spring and on the current political and economic situation in several countries in the region.

The importance of the role of civil society and the need to empower it

Participants were invited to present and discuss the status and impact of civil society in their home countries and in the whole region. While they were divided on whether or not civil society's space is enlarging in the region, most participants insisted that there is space for activism, even under authoritarian rule.

In recent years, many countries in the Middle East have witnessed an increase in government restrictions and monitoring which negatively affected freedom of expression and anti-corruption efforts. In addition, academics and intellectuals have been majorly excluded from political debates since the beginning of the Arab Spring. As one young academic argued, they can and should be enabled to lead their countries out of conflicts.

One young female researcher presented on the status of women in their communities and also their role in business and politics. Participants agreed that women are increasingly playing an active role in society and capable of receiving good education and enjoying a successful business career. However, as most participants agreed, despite the recent

reforms concerning gender equality, patriarchy remains institutionalised and requires further eradication.

It was concluded that civil society still needs further empowerment and capacity building to address the many unresolved problems which are considered as the main drivers of unrest in the region today. For example, it can play a role in conducting scientific investigations on crimes and atrocities committed during conflicts in order to achieve reconciliation and justice which are necessary for the stability of the region. Many participants stressed the importance of dealing with the past in post-conflict Middle East countries as a necessary step towards sustainable security and stability.

Opportunities for raising awareness and bridging gaps in divided societies

The Middle East is still suffering from many political tensions and conflicts which have created numerous practical limitations to dialogue and cooperation between its communities. Given that many countries share common issues and challenges, participants expressed the importance of enabling dialogue among scientists and youth on a regional level and also between governments and communities on a local level. Several also expressed their willingness and motivation to participate in establishing platforms for dialogue and cooperation.

Although participants agreed that dialogue and communication can contribute to increasing tolerance and cooperation, it was stressed that fears of marginalisation still need to be addressed. In addition, it was agreed that economic opportunities, good education, and basic rights need to be promoted in all societies equally.

II. Brain drain and talent flight: the role of technology in the MENA economic climate

In this session, participants were invited to present and discuss the issues which lead to brain drain and talent flight and to discuss the opportunities and challenges arising from the use of technology and the growing global trend of automation, digitisation, and virtualisation.

Why are young people not staying in their home countries?

As several participants highlighted, corruption, lack of reform, lack of basic rights and economic opportunities are the main reasons for brain drain and talent flight in many countries in the region. Young people fear they won't have a future as they do not receive appropriate educational and professional orientation; in fact, many argued that young people would be willing to stay in their home countries if they feel their dignity and human rights are respected. Governments should seek to overturn the effect of brain drain and talent flight by creating incentives for their diasporas to return. However, any promises or strategies need to be consistent and their fulfillment must be guaranteed in order to promote long-term trust and economic development.

Technology: a double-edged sword

One effective way to create economic opporunities for youth across the region is technology, especially information and communication technology. However, there is a common belief that technology is not contributing to developing the skills of youth. It was highlighted that due to the lack of clear direction and strategy for the use of technology, youth have been overwhelmed by the overflow of audio-visual information and social media. As one young researcher argued, this has contributed to a significant reduction in their attention span and also a waste of considerable time and resources without a real contribution to innovation and creativity.

Young people need to be able to interact and socialise with people physically while growing up in order to develop their social and communication skills. Therefore, the use of technology should be oriented towards enhancing skills and knowledge. In addition, it must be ensure that communities can still exist physically with the necessary support and infrastructure to strive and educate its youth through role models, good societal behavior and the establishment of a cohesive identity. Many participants emphasised that technology should respect the different identities, cultures, and religions of youth in the region.

III. Radicalism and Violent Extremism: identified trends in the Middle East and in Europe

On the issue of radicalism and violent extremism, presenters and participants were invited to discuss trends of extremism, the issue of foreign fighters and also the role of states and religious institutions in countering extremist narratives.

Frustration of the youth and the search for an identity lead to radicalisation

The opinions of participants diverged on whether terrorism is a psychological problem or not. However, most agreed that recruitment of youth by extremist groups becomes easy when education delivery is poor, and where economic opportunities and/or a clear identity are lacking. The frustrations of the young have been capitalised on by Daesh which was able to attract large numbers of foreign young fighters from other countries in the region and also Europe.

As one young researcher argued, the lack of a strong identity and prospects for the youth in Europe has enabled religious ideology and ritual violence to shape a new group identity which was attractive for the frustrated youth in Europe. One of the arguments for the failure of Prevention of Violent Extremism strategies was the lack of youth involvement in shaping and implementing them. Participants insisted that it is crucial for governments to invest in orienting youth and give them the freedom to shape their own futures.

Is there a united front against terrorism?

Although there are many similarities in radical and violent extremist trends in both Europe and the Middle East, participants' discussions highlighted many divergences in their opinions on the roots of terrorism and also how to combat it. Some argued that there are other drivers for violent extremism which might not have been addressed such as the situation in the household, domestic abuse, and violence. Most participants agreed that instead of political systems, cultural systems need to be analysed in order to find ways of promoting tolerance and positive economic development through them as they have a greater impact on people in the region.

Six concrete project ideas towards change

Every session was followed by a focused working group discussion during which participants revisited the issues and opinions expressed in the plenary sessions in order to develop a common approach in their brainstorm on project ideas. Afterwards, they were invited to form task forces and to contribute to existing and new practical project ideas. Project ideas were presented at the end of the conference and all participants showed engagement and willingness to cooperate in making these projects take place. The working group sessions and task forces were able to produce several concrete project ideas:

- **The Encyclopedia of Youth Opportunity**
- **Arab Iran Working Group-- Phase I: The Nexus of Water and Energy**

- **Using audio-visual content to break barriers and build bridges in divided societies**
- **From Potential to Employment – creating economic opportunities with social benefits**
- **Women in the MENA region Forum**
- **Supreme Memer: Challenging discourses through memes**

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 establishment of a network of young leaders

Similar to the one in 2016, this conference provided a unique platform for a broad range of students and young professionals from various countries of the MENA region to engage in an open, respectful and productive dialogue. It contributed to establishing a robust network of young, active, and motivated academics and professionals who are committed to making the region a more stable and prosperous place. Several avenues and possibilities for cooperation among participants were identified and there was a collective positive and collaborative attitude in the discussions during the plenary and working group sessions.

During the conference, participants were able to develop an understanding of each other's beliefs and narratives. Many participants highlighted the importance of cooperation and tolerance despite their divergent beliefs and opinions. Moreover, some participants stressed that young and new leaders need to be empowered to initiate institution-building and reform processes to get rid of the structures which sustain the beliefs that obstruct positive change.

The conference did not only feature some very insightful discussions but also produced a wide range of creative and innovative initiatives which contribute to establishing partnerships among youth in the region in the aim of challenging beliefs and belief systems in the region. The presented projects ideas 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 challenging beliefs and belief systems.

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