

EDA INSIGHT

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The MENA Youth Conundrum:
Generating Productivity, Preventing Disillusionment
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Summary

- With the exception of several Gulf countries, **educational and professional opportunities remain low for many MENA youth**. With the number of young adults increasing rapidly throughout the region, the issue is often not addressed with the necessary urgency.
- The MENA region has, on average, **the highest youth unemployment in the world**. Within the region, the lowest official figures can be found in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, the highest in Libya and Egypt. If all remains equal, the youth unemployment rate is expected to rise.
- The inability to channel the creative energy of a growing number of young adults into productive livelihoods will keep having a **negative effect on domestic economies, social cohesion and on regional stability**.
- Substantial **time and resources need to be dedicated to enable successful transitions into adulthood**: from education to employment, from living with the parents to starting families, and to productive and constructive participation in society.
- This is ever more important as **frustrated socio-economic expectations can drive crime and extremism**. The MENA region is particularly vulnerable, as in addition to a lack of job opportunities, parts of the region are witness to protracted conflicts, lack of trust in authorities and deepening sectarian divides.
- For MENA's youth **to become competitive, a mindset change is needed** in favor of self-reliance, entrepreneurship, vocational training and autonomous learning. The task of governments and parents is to provide youth with the tools and value-sets needed to unlock their talents.
- An enabling environment includes **quality education relevant to professional life, equal access to the job market, job-creating investments and merit-based hiring**. Youth should be involved in policy-making and positive narratives of change need to be promoted.
- **Technological and financial planning skills** should be part of the curriculum and ideally, future employers and students should be included in drafting curricula and teaching methodologies. Schools could **partner with companies and include career services** as well as internships.
- **Private sector careers will need to be seen as desirable**, both from a financial perspective as well as from a societal perspective, while governments should reduce regulatory barriers to establishing and running businesses and take steps to attract investments.
- Given the scope of the challenge, **technology needs to be leveraged to scale potential solutions**. Public and private sector alike should further explore the opportunities offered by micro-work virtual markets, 3D printing and the app-economy as well as controllable, remote employment.
- A lot can be done to generate change for the better. **Countries pioneering in the region with innovative policies, including on youth inclusion and vocational training, should serve as role models** to help generate positive results elsewhere.

The Issue

The protracted nature of the conflicts and tensions in parts of the MENA region keep negatively affecting millions of young individuals as they transition into adulthood. With the smaller Gulf States forming a welcome exception, youth unemployment in the region is the world's highest. For many regional youth, prospects of a productive livelihood remain bleak and without impactful improvements, parts of the region risk nurturing a new generation that is unproductive and frustrated. This would not only negatively affect the region's domestic economies and the quality of life, but could also increase criminal activity and create further vulnerability to radicalization.

With the region's youth bulge maturing, the urgency of the issue cannot be ignored. Over 30 per cent of the overall population is currently between the ages of 15 and 29, representing more than 100 million individuals. A quick glance at the population pyramids of for example Jordan, Egypt and Yemen should suffice to illustrate that the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better and that serious action is required (see figure 1).

The problem is not new and has long been on the relevant national and international agendas. Some countries in the region, including the UAE, are investing heavily in the next generation. In other countries, war has upset the implementation of relevant policy priorities. But in still other countries, meaningful improvements have been blocked predominantly by political barriers.

This EDA Insight provides an overview of the current debate on MENA youth and their vulnerabilities, focusing in particular on the situation in the Levant and North Africa. It provides policymakers in countries stable enough to implement change with ideas for concrete action in the fields of education, employment, community resilience and strategic communications. The paper also explores the role of international diplomacy and concludes with a call to unlock the region's potential by leveraging technology to create jobs on a much larger scale.

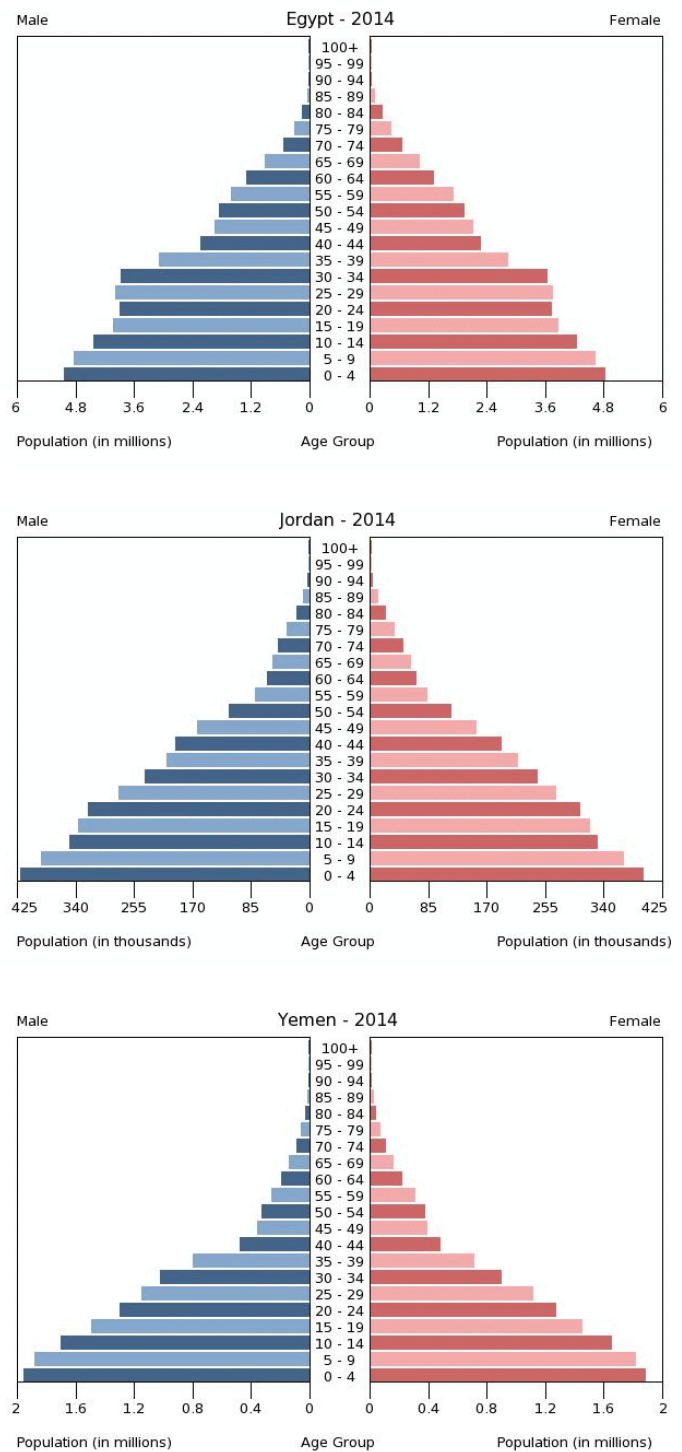


Figure 1 (source: CIA World Fact Book)

Why Is It Important?

- Channeling the creative energy of the growing number of young adults into productive livelihoods will have a positive effect on domestic economies, social cohesion and the stability of the region and beyond.
- Today's world is globalized, competitive, well-educated and driven by the private sector. If MENA governments and parents want youth to be able to compete with their international peers, a mindset change is needed in favor of self-reliance and entrepreneurship.
- Helping youth in the Levant and North Africa build up productive lives in their own region is ever more important now that the international community is losing appetite to accommodate economic migrants as well as refugees seeking opportunity and protection away from home.

MENA's Youth Predicament

When analyzing the general characteristics of the region's youth, a look at education statistics is cause for initial optimism. Education and literacy rates in the MENA region have risen dramatically in recent decades and governments have shown strong dedication to this cause. To mention just one impressive figure: the average level of schooling in the region has quadrupled since the 1960s and literacy rates improved from 59% in 1990 to 78% in 2010.¹

A closer look however dampens the enthusiasm. As the World Bank suggests, "schooling has not been synonymous with learning".² National school systems tend to be of low quality and unable to teach students skills that are relevant to the labor market. The mismatch of skills is often cited as one of the key reasons why economies, the private sector in particular, have great difficulties absorbing the growing number of job-seeking graduates, including those with advanced degrees. A preference for government jobs and a disdain for service-oriented jobs is another factor negatively affecting the private sector in several MENA countries, Jordan in particular.

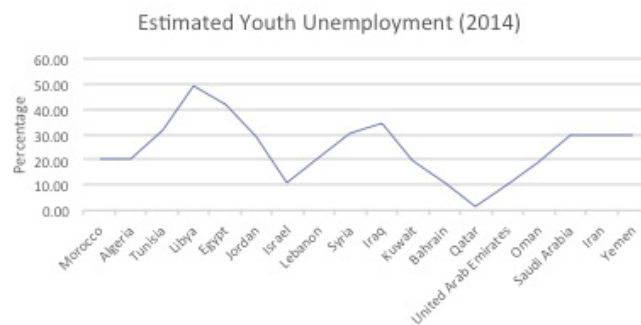


Figure 2 (Source: ILO)

Related to this mismatch of skills - and often of expectations - youth unemployment in the MENA region is the highest in the world. While official youth unemployment rates in the smaller Gulf states are hovering around 14%³, rates reached 49% in Libya, 42% in Egypt and 29% in Jordan in 2014 (see figure 2).⁴ Another often used indicator is the "NEET" ("Not in Employment, Education or Training"). Designed to measure a lack of professional motivation or opportunity, the average NEET in the advanced OECD-economies stands at 15% of all 15-24 years old. In Morocco, for example, the estimated NEET is over 50%.⁵

In 2009, the World Bank called upon MENA governments to take urgent action, stating that by 2015, the region needed to create around 100 million jobs to absorb all those entering the workforce.⁶ Now, in mid-2016, social uprisings, conflicts and war have further exacerbated the situation. With only a few exceptions, not enough has been done to improve the situation. A recent survey conducted amongst Arab youth showed that more than half of MENA youth believe they do not have satisfactory professional opportunities. In Yemen, 82% were negative about career prospects, in Libya 71% and in relatively more stable Palestine and Tunisia, 56% were pessimistic.⁷

Another important and relevant indicator is that of trust in government. Trust in the authorities of the countries in the Levant and North Africa is generally low. It is worthwhile noting that young people express significantly lower levels of trust in their governments than the 50+ generation.⁸ According to Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Barometer, 61% of the region's population felt corruption had increased in the past year. In Lebanon, the figure was as high as 92%.⁹

In recent years, the situation has been compounded by the growing number of displaced people and refugees that the region needs to absorb. With 183 registered refugees per 1,000 inhabitants, Lebanon currently hosts the largest number of refugees in relation to its national population and Jordan ranks second, with 87 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants.¹⁰ Turkey hosts the largest absolute number of – again, registered – refugees, amounting to 2.54 million people, according to the latest UNHCR report.¹¹ With low prospects of refugees returning home any time soon, host communities need to find ways to cater not only for their own youth, but also for refugee youth, in terms of education and productive livelihoods – including addressing the potential consequences of overburdened classrooms and downward pressure on wages.

Socio-Economic Hardship, Crime and Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

The negative outlook for the region's youth will not only constitute a waste of economic resources and a deterioration in society's quality of life, but will also increase a new generation's vulnerability to looking for solace in crime or in a delusional or utopian worldview. Focusing on the latter, the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's recent Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism testifies that radicalization and violent extremism have become global concerns (see Box 1). The document mentions the following general drivers of violent extremism and terrorism:¹²

- A lack of socio-economic opportunities
- Marginalization and discrimination
- Poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law
- Prolonged and unresolved conflicts
- Harsh treatment in detention facilities

A large number of countries in the Levant and North Africa suffer from several or all of these conditions. Many struggle with vast socio-economic problems, know prolonged and unresolved conflicts and host pockets of lawlessness where extremist and criminal networks thrive. In some places, good governance is lacking and penitentiary institutions are suboptimal. And in our connected world, information and communications technology have helped spread feelings of collective deprivation and (historical) injustices beyond local communities.¹³

In addition to the general factors mentioned above, the region also has religious fault lines that are easily exploited by extremist groups. While in the 2016 Arab Youth Survey a lack of jobs and opportunities has been indicated as the most important reason for attraction to the extremist cause, this was quickly followed by feelings of religious superiority and tensions between Sunni, Shia, other religions and Western-inspired secularism.¹⁴ Poor governance and rights violations also play their parts as extremist propaganda tends to emphasize perceptions of corruption, injustice and societal inequality.

Box 1: The UN Framework: From Counterterrorism to Preventing Violent Extremism

In 2006, the United Nations adopted by consensus a Global Counter Terrorism Strategy, based on the following four pillars:

- 1) *Addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism*
- 2) *Preventing and combatting terrorism*
- 3) *Building states' capacity and strengthening the role of the United Nations*
- 4) *Ensuring human rights and the rule of law*

Within that framework, in 2011, the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (CGCTF) was launched and included a Working Group on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), co-chaired by the UAE and the United Kingdom. In the framework of the GCTF, Hedayah, an International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), opened its doors in Abu Dhabi in December 2012.

In February 2016, the UN member states welcomed an Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism, drafted by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. Reiterating the need for a comprehensive approach, he argued that for the past decade, two pillars of the Global Counter Terrorism Strategy, those on "addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism" and on "ensuring human rights and the rule of law" had been seriously overlooked.

Contrary to what is often assumed, no significant correlation between low income or low educational levels and radicalization has been established. Instead and disturbingly in light of the growing level of education of the MENA youth, the evidence tends to point to a stronger correlation between higher levels of education and income in the region, and the support for extremist thought.¹⁵ Some scholars even suggest that radicalization tends to occur relatively more frequently in better educated circles and that surges of violent extremism are likely to occur after a relatively sudden and massive expansion of higher-education opportunities – when not followed by an expansion of job opportunities.¹⁶

In terms of the processes of radicalization at the individual level, there are no reliable statistical studies that provide a rationale as to why a specific person radicalizes (and someone else does not). A rise in youth suicides related to unemployment indicates a rise in negative coping mechanisms.¹⁷ Radicalization is another form of a negative coping mechanism, but only few areas of consensus exist on what is behind this. According to studies, the characteristics tend to include:¹⁸

- Individual or collective grievances and a perception of grave (historical) injustice
- A search for purpose and meaning in life
- The need for (group) acknowledgment and self-worth
- Feelings of anger and frustration and crushed aspirations
- Boredom and a search for excitement in life

As these factors are all at the psychological level, it is difficult to run any meaningful profiling. In general, educated young people who see their expectations frustrated and their dreams shredded are considered most vulnerable to extremist propaganda.¹⁹ Recruiters for extremist networks tend to play into young people's personal quests to find meaning and feel significant. Radicalization often develops in a small social circle, which can be a tight group of friends or family. However, in our interconnected and technologically advanced world, that social circle can also be located in virtual space.²⁰

Encouraging Productivity and Preventing Disillusionment

The demographic developments are difficult to argue with, and difficult to change. With the MENA youth bulge maturing, governments – as well as youth and parents – will need to dedicate additional time and resources to enable successful transitions into adulthood: from education to employment, from living with the parents to starting families, and to productive participation in society. Even when the current outlook is bleak, there is much (more) that can be done to bring about positive change.

Generating structural change and long-lasting positive outcomes requires multiannual investments and a coordinated, long-term approach, as well as vision. Partly youth are responsible for their own success, but the ability to be successful will depend on the courage and leadership of their country's policy-makers to create the necessary enabling environment. At the bare minimum, policy-makers in the stable parts of the region should dedicate serious attention to the following four policy objectives:

- Improvements in the quality of education and its relevance to professional life
- Creating employment and a change in mindsets with regard to what constitute respectable professions and careers
- (Re-)building of community resilience and trust in authorities
- Promotion of non-violent narratives of change and progress, including through strategic communications

Of course, specific countries have specific needs, but a good number of general ideas will apply to all. Certainly, an assessment of what is needed in individual cases has to start with including youth themselves in programming and policy-making, but in many places, a rhetorical focus on youth does not translate into actual changes in the allocation of budget funds.²¹ Setting a positive example, the UAE recently pioneered with the appointment of a 22-year old Minister of State for Youth Affairs and the creation of the Emirates Youth Council.

Education: Teach Relevant, (Self-) Employable Skills And Autonomous Learning

Increased access to education alone does not necessarily help in creating a productive economy or resilience against extremist thought. However, children and youth spend around sixteen years in schools and as such, education is key to shaping worldviews and life-long skills. Keeping the context of the region in mind, the following general recommendations can be made:

- **Equip students with marketable skills, hands-on experience and an entrepreneurial spirit.** Students should be better prepared (and motivated) for private sector employment and self-employment. Education should include technological and financial planning skills and encourage autonomous learning.²² Ideally, future employers and students would be included in drafting curricula and developing teaching methodologies. Schools could partner with companies and include career services as well as internships.
- **Empower educators to provide quality education.** If not taught well, improvements in curricula are pointless. In some country cases this means recruiting on different teaching skills and practices, elsewhere this might mean providing better salary packages and still elsewhere, this could mean providing instructors with the appropriate education equipment. However, it is important that instructors have practical experience and at all time keep the interest of the student at the core of their teaching.
- **Teach critical thinking to instill a nuanced and moderate worldview.** Value formation and behavioral skills are predominantly developed in early childhood.²³ From a young age, students should be taught problem-solving skills, critical thinking and the ability to understand and accept different interpretations of reality as well as the construction of rational arguments. Students should develop diverse interests and engage for example in sports, drama or debating. With the right supervision and encouragement, this can help build communal identity, self-confidence and a sense of self-worth.

Employment: Change Mindsets And Find New Ways To Create Jobs

Being unemployed, especially early in one's career, can have significant negative implications for social life, marriage and family life. This can increase criminal activity and social unrest, whereas extremist groups tend to prey on places with a lack of economic and societal prospects that generate large numbers of frustrated youth. While no solutions will be found overnight to change this, general steps in the right direction could include:

- **Encourage and value private sector careers and self-employment.** The gap between benefits in the public and private sectors has to shrink. Private sector careers will need to be seen as desirable, both from a financial perspective as well as from a societal perspective. The sector itself can help by investing more in professional development, in order to nurture and retain talent.
- **Invigorate the private sector.** To encourage private sector investments and self-employment, governments should make it easier to invest and do business, addressing the challenges identified in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business survey.²⁴ Governments can actively help by running PR campaigns in favor of private sector development and can promote role models for the general public.
- **Change the hiring mindset.** A lack of connections tends to be at the heart of explaining the unemployment of smart and ambitious youth in the MENA region. While hiring is often done through family and friends, government entities as well as private companies need to understand how they will benefit from attracting and retaining the most qualified candidates and where to find such candidates.

Community Resilience: Strengthen Ties And Trust

Creating positive and productive transitions into adulthood will need to be a community effort. Recruits for the extremist cause often decide to (at least mentally) leave their home community and join a new community, with extremist networks playing into adolescents' search for (group) acknowledgment. To help prevent this from happening, actions at the national and local level could include:

- **Encourage structural inclusion of youth in government.** According to the OECD, the exclusion of youth in governance structures is seen as a major impediment. Governments could for example follow the UAE experiment of having a young cabinet member focusing on youth issues, and establishing impactful youth councils and circles to directly engage them in policies that affect them.
- **Restore trust between communities and authorities.** Security-based rights violations tend to fuel extremism, with prisons often key to radicalization processes. To reverse the low levels of trust between communities and authorities, political courage is needed to de-politicize the security system, tackle corruption and implement for example best practices such as community-oriented policing models.
- **Foster stronger local relationships.** Involving family and others in the community, including moderate religious institutions in school systems (primary and secondary) is crucial. Rehabilitated extremists can also be coopted, as youth tends to listen to peers rather than adults. After-school programming can provide a sense of shared responsibility for safety and development.
- **Partner with the private sector and use credible role models.** Given the low level of trust towards authorities, government entities are not always the most credible messengers.²⁷ Private sector entities such as marketing technology companies, PR firms and other non-governmental entities can provide insights as well as neutral channels for sending messages. Young role models and celebrities have proven to be good messengers.
- **Partner with like-minded countries.** The establishment by the US and the UAE of the Sawab Center is an example of how Western and Middle Eastern countries can cooperate to address a common concern and amplify credible voices to combat extremism, through combining resources and sharing technological knowledge.

Strategic Communication: Emphasize Positive Narratives Of Societal Change

Contemporary extremist groups have understood extremely well the art of messaging, the opportunities offered by social media and the weak spots of disenfranchised youth. Governments have been slow in catching up. The overall understanding of how extremist propaganda strategies work has increased immensely, though it remains difficult to craft nuanced counterarguments against the extremists' erroneous message that the solution for a better world is, simply, violence.²⁵ Additional efforts could include:

- **Complement reactive messaging with proactive campaigns.** Counter-messaging should go hand-in-hand with campaigns promoting alternative, positive narratives about personal and professional life. These can address young people's hopes and expectations, change attitudes towards study and career choices and highlight a sense of shared responsibility for the future.²⁶ While social media is important, the influence of human interaction and face-to-face communication should not be dismissed.

Scaling Solutions by Leveraging Technology

Of all the actions mentioned above, the need to create more job opportunities and to prepare youth to take advantage of the opportunities on offer remain key. Governments should invest in exploring cost-effective opportunities provided by rapid developments in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, in order to scale the opportunities and live up to the major challenges at hand.

Online education, (Arabic) MOOCs and blended learning methodologies can complement traditional teaching in order to reach a much larger group of people. Online courses also have the advantage of being mobile and can for example offer opportunities for refugee and displaced youth to continue their studies. For these digital-based solutions to reach their great potential, what is needed is reliable and fast internet penetration, the necessary security and clear but enabling rules and regulations.²⁸

While self-employment, expansion of existing businesses and attraction of new (foreign) investments is at the heart of meaningful job creation, ways to use digital technology to match demand and supply can also be explored further. Digitalization has already radically changed the way we work and can create alternative pathways to employment. This can include micro-work virtual markets, online niche markets for the self-employed, 3D printing and the app-economy as well as controllable, remote employment.

What Role for International Diplomacy and Development Cooperation?

Many of the recommendations in the field of education, job creation, community resilience and strategic communications are responsibilities at the national level and none of the general recommendations are easily implementable. Nonetheless, the failure to provide more opportunities to youth in the Levant and North Africa is likely to be felt in other parts of the region and the world, both with regard to migratory pressures, increased crime levels as well as other threats to security.

Thus, it is in the interest of the international community to actively acknowledge these risks, press for action and think about ways to alleviate the situation. Several initiatives could be taken at the level of diplomacy and international development cooperation. Countries such as the UAE in particular, those that are pioneering with innovative policies, are well-positioned to serve as role models and help generate positive change throughout the region. Initiatives that could be considered include:

- Youth-related issues could become a recurrent agenda item during high-level bilateral and multilateral meetings and summits. At the technical level, regional taskforces could bring together youth-focused government officials, youth and business representatives to exchange ideas and best practices of linking education to employment, and discuss innovative ways forward.
- Business representatives and governments could work together to map the current administrative and other barriers to large-scale, job-creating investments in the region and discuss how such barriers could be best overcome.
- Governments and working groups could more systematically share their ideas and best practices in the relevant regional and international fora, including the UN Counter Terrorism Committee (CTC). The CTC has committed itself to presenting to the Security Council (by April 2017) a proposal for a “comprehensive international framework” to counter the narratives used by terrorist organizations for recruitment and general propaganda.²⁹ The more valuable input it receives, the better the outcome will be.
- Incentives could be increased for development agencies and the private sector to work together on projects that improve marketable skills of the MENA work force, generate employment, improve community resilience, increase access to internet, and promote positive narratives of change.
- Public and private sector alike should invest in research that maps local employment needs and explores the possibilities offered by ICT. Innovative and creative solutions could in particular be found in youth consultation, online education models, job platforms, and remote employment models.

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