



## Policy Paper

# Towards a Culture of Peace in the Middle-East *The role of Youth Organisations*

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## **Introduction**

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) has been actively involved at the global level, promoting the values of peace, Human Rights and solidarity in partnerships with institutions, but also with regional youth platforms. The development of sustainable, independent, inclusive and democratic youth NGOs has always been a core element of the YFJ's activity, along with its advocacy work, in order to gain political recognition from public authorities for such youth organisations and the role they play in society.

In this framework, the YFJ has developed partnerships with regional platforms and further developed cooperation with them, supporting the above-mentioned principles. Nevertheless, and up to very recently, the complex reality of the Middle-East had limited the possibilities for the YFJ to establish stable cooperation with young people from this region, despite the relations and actions of YFJ Member Organisations with youth organisations in the region.

Since 2002, while pursuing the objectives of solidarity and aiming to guarantee a coherent approach to the YFJ's work with other regions of the world, contacts have been established with youth organisations in the Middle-East. The YFJ has seized this opportunity as a way to help understand the common challenges shared by young people in the Middle East and in Europe, to promote the core values of the YFJ, and to enhance the role youth organisations can play in society.

## **Background**

This Policy Paper is directly linked to the outcomes of two Study Visits to the Middle East<sup>1</sup> as well as on the work of the Steering Group on the Middle-East Youth Initiative. The objectives of this work were to understand the realities facing young people and youth organisations in the region; to promote initiatives of co-operation and networking between Member Organisations and partners in Europe and the Middle East; and to support the development of youth strategies and youth policies in the region.

While prior actions may not have allowed the YFJ to explore the youth reality in the Middle-East in a holistic manner, they have helped to set the basis for cooperation processes in the region and have allowed the emergence of possible partnerships and further developments at the inter-regional level.

The YFJ believes that this approach will enable young people and youth organisations to develop a comprehensive understanding of the culture, the religion, and the social and political realities in Europe and in the Middle East.

Therefore, this Policy Paper focuses on the promotion of a culture of peace, the role youth organisations and civil society can play in this, and preparation of the ground for further actions. It will focus on several dimensions and actors in the Middle East and draw a broad picture of the challenges young people and youth organisations face at the regional level.

## **The situation of Young People in the Middle-East**

Young people represent the majority of the population in the Middle-East. This would suppose a large scope for participation and for playing a role in the development of their society. However, the complex situation and history of the Middle-East does not allow such a process to happen in a natural and harmonious way. Despite a wide variety of youth

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<sup>1</sup> 2004, Fact Finding Mission to Palestine and Israel - 2005, Study Visit to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

organisations in the Middle-East, the mechanisms for participation and representation are very much conditioned by economic, political, social and cultural features, which can vary from country to country and to a very different extent.

Education and employment are pre-conditions to the personal and professional development of young people in the Middle-East. These are also pre-requisites to further participation and involvement in youth structures that would allow them to take a more proactive role in their society. Peace and the culture of peace are core controversial issues that represent the highest appeal to young people and at the same time have a determinant impact on their daily life.

However, young people in the Middle-East wish to take an active role in all spheres of society and are calling for more spaces for participation and dialogue. More and more *ad hoc* initiatives are appearing in countries where youth structures and organisations are not yet well developed; while in some others, where these already exist, there is an increasing participation and level of initiatives by young people, with or without institutional support. Nonetheless, many youth organisations in the region are not lead by young people themselves, limiting the representation of young people.

## **Education**

Education in the Middle-East, as in many countries, is seen as a key way for young people to learn and develop their participation in society. However, and despite the broad and welcome access to formal education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, there are still an important number of challenges linked to the absence of certain educational dimensions and the little value given to non-formal education for instance. Understanding that this is not a priority, the general curricula limits the focus on issues such as intercultural learning and inter-religious dialogue, for instance. Therefore, the role of youth organisations is crucial to providing young people with the opportunity for alternatives to overcome the inadequacy of institutions and to ensure such value-based education for young people. We consider that a real involvement of the institutions is needed concerning giving the means and the importance that non-formal education as a basic resource has in peace-building processes. To improve the educational systems, it is important to strengthen and support independent, democratic and representative student associations in the region.

## **Youth Unemployment**

As for Europe, a general challenge in the Middle East is youth unemployment. Unemployment among youth is to be found in all sectors of the society and is linked to the constraints of the labour market and the impact of the regional instability on domestic economies. An added consequence is the importance of informal sectors of the economy, the migratory flows or the lack of trust in young people in comparison with older generations in society.

The YFJ recognises the common problems facing young people in Europe and in the Middle East. It is therefore accurate to develop a space for the sharing of experiences and to discuss possible actions to be undertaken. Furthermore, the YFJ underlines in this context the importance of youth joining together and raising the topic on domestic political agendas and towards institutions.

## **Youth participation**

Young people in the Middle East are able and willing to take control of their lives and to take an active role in the development of their society. The possibilities to develop sustainable democratic societies are linked to the establishment of an active youth NGO sector and the plurality of youth organisations. Unfortunately, the current possibilities for youth participation in the region are very limited. The basis for an active NGO sector is not provided and in some cases actively constrained.

## **Young women**

One of the most visible challenges is the lack of participation by women, who are rarely represented in political life.

The recognition of women as political players has not yet been achieved, and similarly, the question of the social role and position of women still lacks relevance to the social agenda of some of the region's countries. The YFJ welcomes the initiatives of women's organisations to raise these questions. Despite growing up in patriarchal societies where traditional views on the role of women remain strong, it is important to note that more young women do graduate from university, in comparison to men. Their participation in the job market and economic life is nevertheless still low. We consider that recognising the role of women in conflict resolution is a fundamental step to be taken. The YFJ will consider this line as a priority.

## **Poverty and Millenium Development Goals**

According to the World Youth Report 2005, there are 34 million people between the age of 15 and 24 in the Middle East North African region. Two millions live on less than \$1 a day, 12 millions under \$2 a day. There is no doubt that young people are severely affected by poverty and that young people must be part of creating poverty reduction strategy programmes. In order to combat poverty in the region, indicators on how to measure achievements on MDGs must include a stronger perspective of human rights and ownership among they young.

## **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its effect on young people**

The lives of young people in the Middle East are very much conditioned by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, at different levels and in different ways. Peace is a priority on both the political and social agendas: at the social level, the increase of Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism are strong obstacles to the development of a Culture of Peace. At the economic and political levels, chain reactions and consequences linked to the conflict do impact the lives of all citizens and in particular of young people, preventing them from education to some extent, from mobility, and from participation in organisations aimed at solidarity between people, peace and understanding, and inter-religious dialogue. To some extent, participation is encouraged but strongly linked to security and defence mechanisms (the military or armed groups).

Young people are hostages of a daily reality which limits their access to develop objective and constructive attitudes towards a Culture of Peace, therefore, the implementation of international laws and related UN resolutions would have a great impact.

In particular, the case of the Palestinian refugees, present in a vast majority of countries in the Middle-East, and their limited access to decent conditions in relation to their

education, mobility and employment, are elements of extreme relevance when addressing the issue of the conflict in the region. The Palestinian refugee collective must be tackled from a comprehensive perspective in all countries hosting them, trying to grant a more homogeneous approach.

#### YFJ actions

- ⇒ Continue giving attention to political developments in the region;
- ⇒ Promote actions that give priority to youth as decision-makers in the Middle East and in particular to strategies that contribute to the achievement of a Culture of Peace in the region;
- ⇒ Promote the establishment of dialogue between Middle-Eastern and European youth aimed at a better understanding of the needs and challenges of the young generation;
- ⇒ Support initiatives fighting Islamophobia and Anti-Semitic attitudes in Europe, promoting religious freedom and intercultural respect and understanding;
- ⇒ Facilitate a space for dialogue between youth representatives from organisations from Europe and the Middle-East which promote human rights, diversity, equality and do not use violence as a tool to accomplish their goals;
- ⇒ Promote national youth work development in countries in the Middle-East;
- ⇒ The integration of the Arabic youth into the Israeli Council of Youth Movements (CYMI) is a good example for a supportable interreligious work. CYMI is a natural partner for a common work in the region;
- ⇒ Support a Euro-Middle Eastern exchange of good practice in relation to youth policies on an institutional level;
- ⇒ Engage with partners in NYCs from Europe active in the region and in ICMYO and promote the strengthening of youth movements in the Middle East region. Share these several experiences as a first step for a better and transparent follow-up process;
- ⇒ Where possible, link activities in the area to the WPAY and the MDGs, lobbying UN Agencies to engage more actively in partnership with youth organisations in the Middle East region;
- ⇒ Lobby for the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Youth Forum in a similar format as the Eurolatinamerican Youth Forum (FEULAT) as a space for continuous dialogue and cooperation between youth organisations;
- ⇒ Support interreligious dialogue initiatives to strengthen understanding and cooperation in the Middle East;
- ⇒ Together with Middle East and Northern African youth NGOs and networks, decide upon common ground for joint advocacy on the Barcelona Process and the World Bank initiatives in the region.