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Report

Wilton Park Youth Dialogues: powering the future

Youth as peacemakers

Monday 16 – Wednesday 18 October 2017 | WP1557

Held in Jordan

In partnership with:



Department
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Development

In association with:



The Commonwealth



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Introduction

The Wilton Park Youth Dialogues: powering the future' is a series of events being held throughout 2017 and 2018 with a specific focus on the Middle East, Africa and Europe. The dialogues aim to bring together young people, government and non-governmental organisations, civil society, academics, experts and educationalists, for honest, inclusive conversations about young people and their role in addressing local, regional and global challenges. They set out to provide a forum to discuss the effectiveness of existing policy approaches and promote exploration of what new approaches are needed in order to co-create a more peaceful and prosperous world.

Young people make up a third of those affected by conflict. More than 600 million young people live in fragile or conflict affected areas; at least 25 per cent of those affected by the Syria crisis, for example, are aged 10 to 24. In addition, the protracted crises in Syria, Iraq and nearby countries mean that over 4 million youth in the region are at risk of growing up in volatile settings, and with conflict impacting on their educational opportunities, livelihoods, and wellbeing, and their future prospects. Global concern has increased over those young people who feel 'stuck', excluded from opportunities, and marginalized, and how this might prompt their participation in violent extremism. However, the majority of young people remain peaceful, even when faced with economic adversity and insecurity. Many young people actively contribute to building peace in their communities.

In October 2017, an expert group of 60 participants from 20 countries with representation from government, UN agencies, international and regional civil society organisations, and academia met to discuss the specific challenges and opportunities for young people to contribute to peace in the MENA region. The Dialogue was the second event in 'The Wilton Park Youth Dialogues; powering the future' series, and there was a high level of regional youth representation present.

Delegates met to:

- discuss the current challenges facing youth in the Middle East and North Africa, specifically in relation to their involvement in peacemaking;
- share experience about emerging local initiatives to empower young people and support them in their role in peacemaking and peacebuilding in the

- face of extremism and radicalisation;
- debate the meaning and relevance of a new 'social contract' for young people in the region as a new model of governance to advance peace and stability;
 - discuss the pathways through which some young people seek to promote positive change, while a minority of youth feel attracted to violent groups;
 - explore how young people in the region imagine their futures in a context of religious diversity;
 - discuss how formal and informal education can play a role in developing young people's active participation in their own communities;
 - discuss how UN Resolution 2250 and the UN Secretary General's Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security can be used as the basis for discussion with governments on youth issues
 - build new partnerships.

This report summarizes the debates held at the conference and elaborates the key take-away points:

- The MENA region is one of the most youthful regions in the world: 60 per cent of the population is under 30. Yet youth unemployment sits at 51 percent with highly skilled and tertiary educated disproportionately affected.
- The majority of young people remain peaceful, yet in the international policy arena, the dominant discourse continues to be that a large 'youth bulge' and youth unemployment may cause instability. This discourse is counter-productive to peacebuilding efforts.
- Employment and skill building programmes are not the silver bullet.
- Youth mobility, whether social or otherwise, is significantly limited in the MENA region. Encouraging and enhancing mobility is key to building and sustaining peace in the region.
- Approaches that do not focus on young individuals but on 'youth ecosystems' seem to have higher chances of success. New thinking and strategies are needed for working with religious leaders, among others, as part of this approach.
- The costs of violent conflict are higher than those of peacebuilding. Contradictory policies by Western governments like arms trade, risk jeopardising their support to peacebuilding programmes. Peacebuilding is cost effective work.
- Individual young men and women need to build civic and political competencies to engage with state actors for when opportunities open up. Trainings and workshops need to be followed-up with opportunities for experiential learning. Approaches are also needed to strengthen self-esteem, confidence, and hope.

- Best-practices for working with young people include the genuine co-creation of programme design and enabling young people to run activities, thus enhancing their experiential learning.
- Higher education, especially the arts, philosophy and humanities, needs to receive more attention in the region, as a place for self-actualisation and developing critical thinking but also to develop social relationships across diverse identity groups. This is key to addressing the predominant black-white dichotomous thinking.
- There is a need for developing a new and convincing narrative that encourages young people to take positive action and steer them away from joining violent groups.
- A focus on gender when developing new approaches to countering violent extremism is welcome, but may not replace existing work on women's rights and gender and peacebuilding.
- UN Resolution 2250 presents a new and timely opportunity to engage with governments on youth issues. As per the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security, there is a need to move beyond the dominant focus on 'youth at risk' to young people contributing to peace. Risk-based strategies must not eclipse 'resilience-based' approaches.
- New ways must be found to engage constructively with Islam and include young people in this.
- Policies and programmes must be co-created with young people to develop a positive vision for the future with protagonists or heroes who resonate.

Framing the debate

Youth and (in)security

- The power of youth might be in their sheer numbers: there is demographic momentum as this is the world's youngest youth population: in the MENA region, 60 per cent of the population is under 30. For many international aid agencies, young people are a central priority in the MENA region, and globally.
- Policy discourses continue to emphasize youth as a potential threat, as disruptive and violent. Global concerns over youth especially focus on countries with large youth bulges, high levels of youth unemployment, and rapid urbanisation; factors associated with instability. This discourse is informed by influential studies that have shown correlations between countries that have youth bulges and instability. Accounts of young people being recruited to extremist organisations such as Al-Shabaab and Daesh have fuelled perceptions of violent youth. However, the evidence that there is an actual causal relationship between youth unemployment and violence is very weak, and there are still many gaps in the data. The dominant discourse is about employment, while contributing factors such as a search for identity or belonging have often been neglected. Other factors such as young people's sense of humiliation also remain under-researched despite being key to driving a large number of grievances in the MENA region.
- Perceptions of 'violent youth' have even contributed to thinking that a transition to democracy might prompt disruptive youth action, which is again not supported by evidence. There is a perception that governments have not been 'hard

"Many countries have youth bulges. Many young people are not choosing violence to address their grievances and are actively contributing to peacemaking and peacebuilding. They do not belong to the elites. If unemployed urban youth are really so prone to violence then most capitals in Africa and the Middle East should be in turmoil right now."

“The terrorist attack in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in July 2016 was carried out in a country marked by economic growth and increasing employment. All the perpetrators in that attack were rich, employed and were educated in Western countries. That brought up issues of identity that had been taboo until then.”

“There is a tendency to work with ‘the reachable youth’.

‘I am from a region known for breeding violent extremism in my country. You would think there would be plenty of NGO programmes for youth. But no, there are none. They are all based in the capital and run by young people who have no understanding of what happens on the ground’

‘If practitioners do not clearly specify which young people they want to work with, and leave it to ‘the community’ to identify participants, programmes risk involving those youth who do what they are told, rather than those who talk back’.

enough’ on youth to suppress their engagement in disruptive politics.

- There is evidence that shows that countries that have youth bulges are proactively repressive. This raises the important question: is peaceful dissent possible? There is also evidence that shows that youth distrust and oppose state-led approaches to countering violence extremism (CVE), which often tend to be military responses. It is therefore crucial for CVE efforts to be tackled from a non-military, traditional-security approach.
- Importantly, the majority of young people remain peaceful and actively resist engagement in violence, even when faced with economic adversity, social and political marginalisation, and insecurity. Even more so, many contribute to their communities peacefully, and find alternative ways of expressing themselves politically, outside of formal political institutions.
- ‘Youth’ is not a homogeneous category and the challenges and opportunities are experienced differently based on gender, age cohort, ethnicity and religious identity, sexuality, class, and other patterns of social identity and the ways in which they intersect. Youth is a ‘moving target,’ hence the need to be mindful of the challenges associated with youth as a transitional phase. This makes it impossible to come up with ‘one size fits all’ solutions to the challenges young men and women face.

Beyond UNSCR 2250

1. In December 2015 the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. The Resolution urges member states to consider ways to give youth a greater voice in decision-making at the local, national, regional and international levels. It also urges member states to consider setting up mechanisms that would enable young people to participate meaningfully in peace processes. The progress study on United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 is due to be published in April 2018.
2. Since the majority of the youth remain peaceful, and do not belong to the elites (groups in society that possess relatively more wealth and power than the majority), the focus of the progress study is on the non-elite youth, and on how they respond to marginalisation and exclusion.
3. The progress study will provide new momentum for action since the recommendations will have to be discussed with member states, and therefore youth civil society may have an opening to convince governments that working with youth is a win-win situation. Possibly, advocating for greater involvement through regional, inter-governmental organisations can be effective, as governments may consider advocacy as less threatening when they are not singled out as an example of bad practice.
4. Resolution 2250 is one lens through which to look at youth, peace and security. Implementing the Resolution will require resources. Global spending on peacebuilding is US\$ 2 billion, while global spending on violent conflict amounts to over \$340 billion. This stark discrepancy reflects where global priorities lie, and governments and international institutions will need to commit resources to rectify this imbalance.
5. In terms of who participates, with its call for youth participation in peacebuilding and decision-making at all levels, Resolution 2250 raises the issue of representation. More often than not, youth participating at the national level are the elites. They are most often male, and connected to government. Hence they are likely to bring up issues like jobs and quality education rather than challenging the status quo. These elites are not trusted by the majority of young people. Accordingly, diversifying and disaggregating participation becomes key; participation must expand into both formal and informal platforms such as peace and reconciliation processes.
6. National youth councils or youth parliaments are a default option for promoting youth

“For every \$1 spent on ‘upstream’ conflict prevention and positive peace building, \$16 is saved on the ‘downstream’ costs of violent conflict.”¹

participation. However, at best they are a rubber stamp, and at worst they become the vehicle for producing a new generation that will reproduce a largely exclusionary status quo.

7. At the local level, civil society organisations working through community structures risk targeting local elites, and/or less-vocal youth that have been put forward by community authorities. Again, this does not challenge the status quo or represent the majority of young people.
8. In terms of how youth are expected and supported to participate, delegates voiced concerns that certain civil society organisations shy away from promoting genuine political activism, as youth are meant to make adults feel uncomfortable. Young people learn to engage in an a-political way, and interventions have shifted away from collective action. Some NGOs may have exacerbated a crisis in youth participation or effectively silenced the youth voice.

Innovations in working with youth

9. Delegates heard presentations on diverse interventions and programmatic approaches to working with youth. As in the first Youth Dialogue conference, the importance of working on ‘youth ecosystems’ emerged several times. This approach recognises the importance of young people’s relationships to other social actors in their community - as opposed to focusing on youth in isolation from their social context – and seeks to understand structures and processes of exclusion. Discussions generated a number of lessons and insights:
 - Presenters identified how interventions had made use of an ecosystem approach, and how this had contributed to success in terms of promoting youth leadership, their confidence and collective action. Involving parents, community leaders, and schools was considered important, as well as working with role models and creating links between different identity groups through sports, arts and debate. Essentially, this should entail building a localised evidence-base to inform localised-action.
 - It was recognised that, if an ecosystem is important, interventions need to consider how to work with religious leaders as they are often influential in young people’s lives. Many civil society organisations however are reluctant to work with them.
 - It was also recognised that interventions need to target young people much earlier in life. While children are mainly targeted by programmes focusing on education and health and nutrition, the links between education, peace and social change need to be addressed much earlier in life. For older youth, there is little education on peace offered beyond primary school. This is a missed opportunity.
 - Building internal strength, confidence and self-esteem emerged as virtually a pre-requisite in all youth programming, in order for young people to believe in themselves and their capacities and be hopeful, and undertake action. Programmes need to build life-long soft skills such as dialogue and debate, negotiating, talking with parents and communicating across social differences. Providing young people with the space to express and nurture these skills is crucial.
 - Youth programming is currently heavily unbalanced, with much funding going into employment and skill building. Youth issues include big life questions such as how to interact with each other and find a marriage partner or how to become a respected member of the community. Different interventions, ranging from

¹ Institute for Economics and Peace, “Measuring Peacebuilding Cost-Effectiveness” March 2017: http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Measuring-Peacebuilding_WEB.pdf

“Young people are workshopped to death. Lack of skills and training is not the problem; it’s the lack of real-life opportunities for action.”

taking youth out camping to bringing together youth leaders from minority groups, offered young people a safe space to be together. Rather than the content of actual trainings, these young people valued being listened to and having a space to talk, which boosted their self-confidence.

- An intense debate focused on the multitude of one-off trainings youth are exposed to. Young delegates in particular felt trainings and workshops are not meaningful if they are not accompanied by opportunities to put skills in practice. Adult-led training risks replicating the top-down style of governance young people have grown up with. Experiential learning needs to be promoted, which strengthens the autonomy of young people. Facilitating collective action on local issues, informal education, supporting youth participation in school councils and boards of youth centres, and peer support groups are examples of experiential learning whereby young people can see the effect of their actions.
- Many practitioners felt strongly about the need to have a long-term presence in communities and implement programmes over a longer period of time than most donors are currently willing to fund. Only longer-term engagement will enable real collaborative relationships and trust to build, see projects through, and produce results. Short-term engagements were even considered potentially harmful.

The Story of Muzoon Almellehan: a strong young woman from Syria

The story of a Muzoon, who is now 19 years old, made a huge impression on conference delegates. In 2013, when the conflict intensified in and around her home town, she fled from Syria together with her father. They came to live in a refugee camp in Jordan. Muzoon was very keen to continue her education in the camp and also wanted to ensure that other girls and young women would access education. She started talking to parents in the camp to encourage them to send their daughters to school. Many parents felt that early marriage was the best protection for their daughters, but she managed to persuade many of them that the best protection for their daughters is to have them educated. Since she was one of them in the camp community, she was able to relate to them. Muzoon became UNICEF’s youngest ever Goodwill Ambassador. This Syrian young woman identified her father as a major support, who stood by her side as she spoke to parents, aid agencies and camp authorities. Muzoon also spoke of her aunts and uncles who were all educated people; and of her strong sense of her right to education even when facing hardship. Her hope for change, her aspirations to ‘be someone’, and her feelings of responsibility towards her country, made her persevere. The story of this young woman in many ways reflects the importance of the youth ecosystem. As a young woman she was enabled by her father and family, and as a youth advocate she consciously engaged with the parents of other youth and those involved in service delivery to refugees.

Youth as Peacemakers

10. Starting from examples of youth-focused interventions across the MENA region, discussions focused on the role of youth as peacemakers, and addressed the challenges and obstacles they face. Delegates contributed their views on how youth-led peacemaking initiatives should be supported and scaled up, and a lively debate evolved around a feminist perspective on peacemaking in the region. Not surprisingly given the dominant policy discourses for this region today, many delegates talked specifically about efforts to combat violent extremism (CVE) as part of the much broader spectrum of peacebuilding activities. Throughout the discussions, the complexity of the MENA region came to the fore, hence some delegates cautioned about using discourse such as ‘peace in the MENA region’ as it masks the diversity

within and between countries, and may lead to incompatible policies. In other words, a context-specific, peace-oriented and evidence-based approach is needed.

11. Peace means more than the absence of violence. Positive peace is about having in place relationships and systems that help communities realize their potential, social justice, mutual understanding and respect, and also education and biodiversity.

A feminist approach to peacebuilding

12. In countries where human rights defenders experience increasing levels of state repression, female activists are often disproportionately affected. Apart from physical violence and harassment, they are undermined by a discourse that portrays female activists as those violating the local culture and the social fabric.
13. Young women continue to experience multiple barriers to their participation in formal peacebuilding mechanisms. Even when invited into formal spaces, they face prejudice from other participants. Examples discussed were instances whereby young women were not considered 'Arab enough' because they were vocal and did not wear a veil; and women being invited for the purpose of ticking the gender box without being given actual opportunities to contribute. Young women felt they have to participate in ways that 'fit' the donors' image of the Arab woman as well as the donors' preconception of participation.
14. Too often, a 'gender approach' in practice means a focus on women only, without involving men. Feminist approaches challenge the idea of the 'male hero' and promote counter-narratives about heroism among both genders, showing images of active and strong women.

Beyond current CVE and PVE approaches

15. Motivations for joining extremist groups like Daesh are the result of a complex mix of push and pull factors that are economic, social and political; and interact with structural causes such as inequality and systematic exclusion. While recognising that the full complexity of violent extremism could not possibly be covered in one conference, delegates had a rich discussion over most recent insights and gaps in the debate over CVE and PVE.
 - Daesh is considered successful in the way it offers young recruits a narrative of achievement, social belonging and identity, and a cause in life. Governments and international actors that seek to counter Daesh have not been able to offer the right alternative narrative to prevent young people from joining Daesh.
 - One pull-factor that motivates young people to join Daesh is a notion of heroism, promoted by both fathers and mothers who may feel that Islam and aspects of their identity are threatened by Western nations and other identity groups. This resonates with the narrative offered by Daesh. Examples from other settings, for instance post-conflict settings in Africa, show that it is possible to shift the notion of what makes a hero; from someone who excludes 'the other' to someone who embraces difference. Debate focused on how, then, a narrative can be changed from within? And how can sources and authorities that question the Islamic State and its narrative be identified and supported?
 - In one particular intervention, the role of emotions, and the emotional vulnerability of young recruits, was put forward as a very important driver of their decision to join Daesh. Programmes have thus far paid no or limited attention to emotions, and this should be incorporated when addressing social push-factors.²

"Female peace activists are asked to be strong and vocal, but not too vocal and not too strong!"

"As feminist peacebuilders we welcome a gender-sensitive approach to CVE that is genuine, but it should not be at the expense of women's roles in peacebuilding, or women's rights"

"The West is good at saying what we are against, not for. We are just saying they [Daesh] is bad, we are good. That's not a narrative".

"In some of the communities where young people have decided to join Daesh, people do not talk about extremism but jihad. Mothers think 'extremism' is an invention by the West to eliminate Islam. That is why they think their sons should join, not because of lack of jobs or education."

² Harper, E. (2017) Examining Psychological Drivers of Radicalisation in Jordan. Amman: WANA Institute

- A notion of Transforming Violent Extremism (TVE³) was discussed as one possible alternative to CVE and PVE. This approach recognises the social relationships young people are embedded in, as well as their exclusion and marginalisation. The approach thus addresses social relationships from a peacebuilding perspective. While CVE and PVE are reactive, TVE seeks to alter the dynamics that motivate extremism. TVE approaches want to offer a counter-narrative and positive alternatives to violence.
- Recently, governments and donors have started talking about ‘gendering CVE’ without defining this concept properly, let alone proposing clear approaches for how to do this. They tend to add the word ‘women’ while a gender-sensitive policy or approach is lacking.
- Gendering CVE risks focussing exclusively on women’s role in countering extremism and risks shifting attention away from women’s capacities and roles in promoting positive peace. The ‘gendering CVE’ agenda cannot be a substitute for the gender and peacebuilding agenda, or the women’s rights agenda. Already one can observe responses to the ‘gendering CVE’ trend that are potentially harmful: existing civil society organisations feel they need to reflect CVE priorities in order to continue receiving donor funding, without having expertise on CVE. Some new civil society organisations have sprung up to tap into the CVE and gender funds without having a thorough and grassroots understanding of gender and peace, or women’s rights.

Youth as active citizens

A new social contract for the MENA region?

16. The participation of large numbers of young people in the uprisings across the Arab region was testimony to their wish to exercise voice and be part of governance processes in their countries. After the uprisings subsided, however, many young people again faced economic and political exclusion, despite the changes in leadership and reforms that had occurred. This motivated the discussion on what the concept of a social contract means to young people:

- A social contract is understood in both horizontal and vertical terms; the ways in which a state relates to society as well as people among themselves, and their rights and responsibilities towards one another.
- Key principles underpinning a social contract from a youth perspective are dignity; equal opportunities in the economic, political and social spheres of life; social justice; distribution of wealth in more equal ways; and fairness. The emphasis on inclusion will prompt thinking about the place of refugee communities within a country’s social contract.
- The social contract does not have to be a vertical arrangement between the state (on top) and youth (on the bottom). It also can allow youth to move outside the state, mainly by accessing new technologies and ways of interacting among youth and within the economy. This horizontal orientation, in addition, is regional, and not necessarily bound by national borders.
- A social contract is as much about the what as it is about the how: young people do not only want more educational and job opportunities, they also want to have the opportunity to influence how these are delivered and what they look like. Ultimately, this is about finding new ways of governance. Many young people still want a state, especially in a regulatory role, to ensure equal access to opportunities.
- After the uprisings young people wanted more opportunities to participate in

“There is a poverty of ideas, for thinking about new models of governing”

“The evolving social contract in the Arab world should look at us, young Arabs, as citizens, not subjects.”

“A social contract is implicit. It’s something you don’t necessarily know or talk about, unless things go wrong.”

“It is not about renewing the social contract, but about reforming it. Young people no longer accept the status quo and how governance is done.”

³ See [The Peacebuilders’ Guide to Transforming Violent Extremism](#) published by a Search for Common Ground in April 2017.

“When a state is not delivering, people should make demands in order to uphold the social contract. But as a refugee, you think twice before you challenge a government. A social contract should be empowering for all.”

“Religion is not the only source of violent extremism. Western actors also play a role, for instance by selling arms to leaders in the Arab world.”

“Could the alternative narrative to religious extremism be found in values? Can we promote extremism in

governance. In some cases, youth participation has now been reduced to a seat at the decision-making table. Instead, many young people would like to see a change in the modes of governance altogether and help define new ways of governing.

- For many, there are real barriers and risks to expressing themselves politically. Young people consider political parties intimidating due to past experiences, and currently not the right avenue for participation. Various states are currently taking increasingly repressive measures to curtail online and offline political action. There is no apathy towards politics, but realism: any public action or statement may have repercussions.
- The existing social contract in various countries has broken down as it was experienced as top-down and exclusive; as a pact negotiated among elites. Many young people know their rights, but there is no trust that the state is interested in realising their rights and recognising their potential. Major obstacles are the systemic exclusion of young people, clientelist systems, and the fact that political authority in the region is not based on legitimacy.
- In the economic sphere, young people feel the system is ‘locked’ or ‘closed’ and opportunities can only be accessed through informal connection to the elite, not through merit. Socially, the education system reproduces authoritarianism in which teaching is top-down and stimulates reproducing knowledge rather than critical thinking. Youth centres offer no appropriate space for innovation and creativity. Politically, young people were side-lined immediately after the uprisings and politicians and bureaucrats are still out of touch with youth today. Any change or progress requires a fundamental change in political structures.
- Delegates debated whether it was a lack of ideologies or of mere ideas that contributed to the break-down of the social contract, whereas others emphasised exclusion and inequality as the key factors.
- Many delegates felt that the building of a new social contract must start from the local; from youth themselves, involving parents and other members of communities, to create a new mind set about youth-state relations and promote ownership in a revised social contract. A first step for change could start with finding and addressing inequalities at the community level, recognising individual responsibilities. Building relationships within families and communities in which youth are respected, and where youth learn to respect the space of others was also proposed.
- It was suggested that discussion about a new social contract should be decentralized, so that more government officials and youth could be involved in the debate. Yet, there is likely not to be one vision of what a social contract is, due to the diversity of communities within the region.

Citizenship and diversity: religion for the new generation

17. While the Arab world is predominantly Muslim, it is made up of people of many different faiths and none. Peaceful co-existence with those of other faiths is under pressure, as is the role played by religion. For generations, Islam, for example, served as a galvanizing force, connecting the people of a highly diverse region. For many youth today, Islam remains a highly influential force, both as a religion and as a way of life. However, being a young Muslim now means having to respond to the rise of political Islam, pressure from secularization movements, manipulation of religious content by extremist groups and associated stereotyping as well as addressing how to co-exist with other diverse ethnic and religious groups.

- Participants discussed how people in the region have very different approaches to using and interpreting religious texts. It was proposed that if religion is a living tradition, to which any believer can make a contribution – then every young

values like co-existence or diversity or solidarity with one another?”

person can add something to the interpretation of religious texts.

- What follows from this, is that hitherto marginalized groups might develop their own interpretation, including women and youth. Over the last twenty years, women have increasingly started participating in religious meetings and interacting with religious leaders. Can youth be encouraged to develop their own interpretation of Islam, instead of the mere transmission of religious ideas or practices? Would this help in reclaiming the interpretation and producing new knowledge?
- In some higher-education institutions in the region, young people from different religious groups are brought together to discuss religious texts, and encouraged to resolve contradictions over important issues like diversity. Hence, more inclusion of young people in religious and inter-religious meetings must be supported and encouraged.
- So-called ‘moderate’, ‘liberal’ and ‘extremist’ interpretations of religious texts may diverge over the question of whether Islam needs a state, to what extent state and religious authority need to be separated, and questions over equality in citizenship for different religions. There needs to be an acceptance of the idea that religious texts are open to interpretation.
- Many young Muslims feel that Islam is ‘hijacked’ by either end of the spectrum, both liberal and extremists, with limited space for nuance and diversity in opinions.
- In many contexts, certain groups have claimed the superiority of their interpretation over others. For young people in the world today, the issue of interpretation and contributing to religion as a lived tradition goes hand in hand with questions of diversity, solidarity, inclusion and citizenship. However, many young Muslims cannot openly discuss the role of religion in politics.
- In addition to religious identity, young people are thinking about what their national identity means to them. Especially since the uprisings, young people ask themselves what there is to be proud of either in their faith or in their society.
- When considering the options for political engagement, young people may think along religious or nationalistic lines or both, or identify more strongly with local communities. Many religious organisations offer avenues for becoming involved in charity work and volunteering, and take pride in social and cultural forms of expression. These activities can be meaningful and steer young people away from extremism.
- Even for less-active believers, Islam is an influential force. Self-help and leadership can be reinterpreted in Islamic frameworks; and so can ideas about how to disagree over interpretations, and how to move forward respectfully and co-exist peacefully with those of different beliefs and viewpoints.

Policy Guidance and Next Steps

The debates generated a number of lessons that can be taken forward as policy guidance, some of which echoed the outcomes of the first Youth Dialogues at Wilton Park in June 2017.

- Results of the conference should inform DFID’s new Youth strategy in Jordan and British Council’s work with young people in the MENA region.
- The Arab uprisings were testimony to the ambitions of young people. What young people aspire to should therefore be the starting point for actors supporting young people. Working backwards from youth aspirations, government and civil society actors can continue to hold dialogues about the structural change that is needed. In the MENA region this involves tapping into

existing debates on the social contract.

- Interventions supporting young people's economic opportunities need to go hand-in-hand with approaches that tackle their exclusion as young people feel that opportunities can only be accessed through informal connection to the elite and not through merit.
- Individual young men and women need to build civic and political competencies to engage with state actors for when opportunities open up. Trainings and workshops need to be followed-up with opportunities for experiential learning. Approaches are also needed to strengthen self-esteem and confidence, and hope.
- More effort needs to go into developing positive narratives through which young people are valued and invited to become engaged representing their communities and societies.
- Educational institutions can develop careful strategies to help children and young people think about their place in the world, their relationships to their faith and how they contribute to their religion.

A number of participants have taken concrete steps to take the debates held at the conference forward:

- A follow-up Wilton Park conference will be held in Jordan in October 2018 on the role of employment in preventing violent extremism amongst young people in the MENA region. This will be supported by WANA, Mercy Corps and DFID.
- A Jordan National 2250 Coalition has been formed as a result of this meeting. 16 organisations launched this Coalition in December 2017 on the second anniversary of UN Resolution 2250. Search for Common Ground will co-ordinate these efforts as a way of re-engaging government with youth and youth issues.

Marjoke Anika Oosterom

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