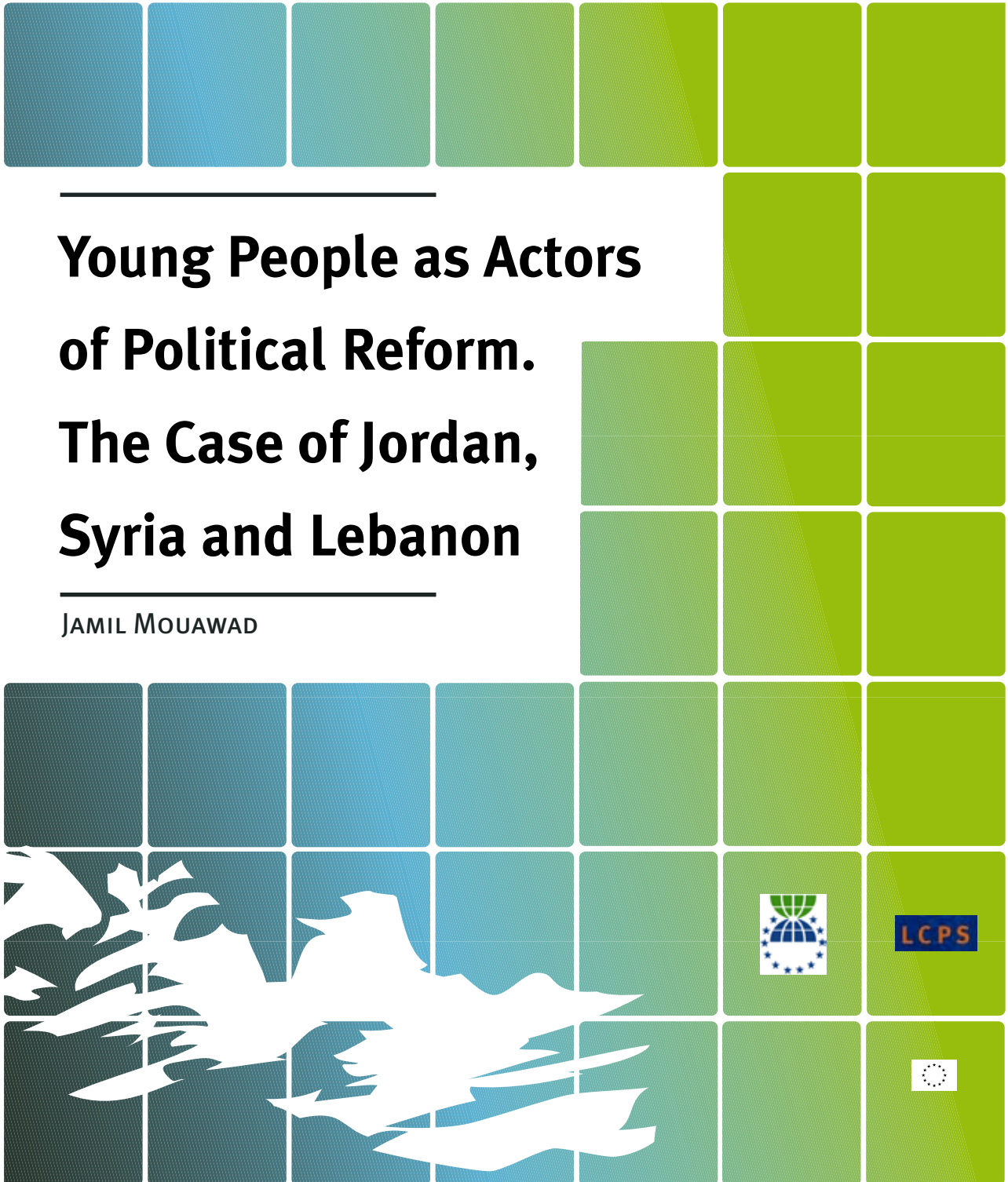

Young People as Actors of Political Reform. The Case of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon

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Executive Summary

This study presents the results of a qualitative study conducted in three Arab countries (Jordan, Syria and Lebanon) aimed at analyzing the role of young people as actors in promoting political reform. As part of the field research, fourteen young people were interviewed in each of these three countries. The participants were divided into two categories. The first category consisted of those involved in civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or political parties, in other words, interviewees who had already experienced participation in public life. In contrast, the second group of interviewees had not actively participated in public life.

This study demonstrates that young people share a common negative view of the concept of “politics” and a strong distrust of national political institutions. According to the study, the freedom margin and, therefore, the level of political tolerance directly affect young people’s political attitudes and their perceptions of politicians. Particularly in Syria and Jordan, the concept of a “hegemony of the leader” is strongly emphasized, as this idea holds that the implementation of reform is directly linked and restricted to the political establishment usually represented by the leading political figure. As a result, there is a general distrust of government institutions, as well as confusion between politics and public policies, meaning that young people’s participation in reform depends on their personal motivation.

Young people do not participate fully in public life as they are excluded from the decision-making process and many consider acts such as expressing their opinions or commenting on political decisions to be a form of political participation. The qualitative research in this report offers strong evidence that young people believe that they have the potential to become influential players and help implement the necessary political reforms in their respective countries. Furthermore, they also share a similar faith in the effectiveness of their role as regards the promotion of change. However, research indicates that there is a wide gap between the will to promote change and the ability to make it a reality.

Scepticism vis-à-vis real reform remains a common denominator that either awakens interest or disinterest in politics among the young people in the three countries. Whether they are interested or just slightly interested, the fact remains that there is an overwhelming feeling that they cannot produce real change. This view is directly related to the system itself, as political reforms are implemented from above and follow the top-down approach.

Finally, the study also substantiates the fact that young people in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon show a strong interest in assuming their responsibilities in public life, in addition to taking part in and contributing to any aspect of political development. This means that participation is not generated by institutions; it is generally based on personal motivations.

¹ Faour Muhammad, *The Silent Revolution in Lebanon: Changing Values of the Youth*, American University of Beirut, 1998, p.1

² For further references see, Friedrich Engels, *Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, International Publishers, New York, 1937. Juergen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1970.

³ Judith Bessant, *Youth Participation: A new mode of Government*, *Policy Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2/3, 2003, p.88.

Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, the youth component of society was generally perceived as the “bedrock of social change and a driving force for revolution”¹. As such, research and studies on young people conducted in those years focused on university students, student movements and social values².

Social student movements in the West in those years had a great influence on this research trend, as youth movements were characterized as active agents of protest. 1968 witnessed a wave of student unrest, such as the student strike in France in May 1968 prompted by the desire to achieve social equity. At the time, there were more police per head of population than in almost any other country in the western world and, in early 1968, protests against a restrictive education system erupted into clashes between students and police. Other examples are the protests in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late sixties and early seventies during which students formed the backbone of movements protesting against the war in Vietnam.

The past few decades have witnessed the publication of a number of studies of young people and their link to existing social ailments. It was maintained that “young people have long been identified in the popular Western imagination as both the cause and the victims of various social problems, ranging from spiraling juvenile crime to economic crises, to epidemic delinquency”³.

Nevertheless, it was only in the 1990s that youth issues were linked to political concepts, such as political reform, participation, young entrepreneurs, and agents of change, among others. The last decade has witnessed a major change in youth issues, especially in terms of youth participation. Nowadays, young people are considered the main pillar of social change movements and they are increasingly regarded as main players in societal evolution and drivers of political reform. Despite the fact that the term “youth participation” is found in democratic jargon and the discourse of international organizations, youth participation is indeed a cornerstone for initiating change and advancing potential processes of reform.

In most developed democracies, youth participation is seen as necessary for reforms and considered an ongoing process that is increasingly being discussed in civil society and government spheres. Yet, this phenomenon is not limited to developed democracies; it is also associated with the gradual reforms that are emerging in Arab countries often denoted as underdeveloped. With this in view, this study sets out to achieve a better understanding of young people and their patterns of political participation in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Thus, it is important to analyze if and how young people in these societies can be strengthened and thus used to foster political reform in a sustainable way.

There are three factors that render the study of Arab youth of great importance. Firstly, in purely demographic terms young people constitute the majority in Arab societies. Secondly, young people represent tomorrow's elite and decision-makers. Thirdly, young people are vital elements for the promotion of any political development aiming at the so-called democratic reform process. Hence, this study will analyse the role that young Arab people in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon play, or could play, in political reform processes, thus shedding light on the meaning of youth, as well as on the nature of reform in the southern Mediterranean area in general. Taking this as a starting point, the first question that arises relates to how young people are being defined and what is meant by political reform in the southern Mediterranean area.

The definition of youth varies from one culture to another⁴. One common sociological definition of youth as a social category, as denoted by the Jordan Human Development Report in 2000, states that youth comprises a series of transitions “from adolescence to adulthood, from dependence to independence, and from being recipients of society's services to becoming contributors to national economic, political and cultural life”⁵.

As for the idea of political reforms in the southern Mediterranean area, it has become a major foreign policy priority for the international community, especially after the events of September 11, 2001. However, is reform in Arab Mediterranean countries the result of internal or external pressure? Is it feasible to ask whether those reforms are undertaken from the top or do they follow a bottom-up approach?

Political reform, according to the Alexandria statement of March 2004 “refers to all direct and indirect measures for which governments, civil society and the private sector are responsible - measures that could help Arab societies and countries advance, without hesitation, towards building concrete and genuine democratic systems”⁶.

What is meant by this statement is that reform is a process that is not exclusive to governments, but that it is, in fact, a process that engages all the three actors mentioned.

⁴ For a detailed review of youth classification, see: World Youth Report, United Nations, 2003, pp.5-9.

⁵ Jordan Human Development Report 2000, The Youth of Jordan. (<http://www.undp-jordan.org/JordanHumanDevelopmentReport/tabid/81/Default.aspx>)

⁶ Alexandria Declaration, March 2004, “Arab Reform Issues, Vision and Implementation”, <http://www.arabreformforum.org/en/Files/Document.pdf>

With young people being one of the major active components in civil society, it is imperative to understand young people's role in processes of reform. Hence, this study sheds light on their participation in civil society, as well as the margin for action that they have within current political systems. However, it should be noted that "reforms have been introduced from the top, by governments acting on their own initiative rather than in response to specific demands from their citizens"⁷. This shows that "whatever the reforms are, they will not alter the authoritarian aspect of the regimes since they are carried out by the governments themselves without consultation of their constituency"⁸. Furthermore, there is no concrete movement that links members of the political elite with the population in order to elaborate on potential approaches as regards the reform of existing political systems. However, the hopes of young people that are committed to reform in the Arab world rose with the ascent to power of four young leaders in Jordan, Syria, Bahrain and Morocco in the late nineties and early 2000⁹. But their efforts towards reform were met with mixed results, and so far most Arab countries remain only "rhetorically committed to reform".

In this context, the publication of the United Nations Arab Human Development Report in May 2002 contributed to the sense of urgency in beginning reforms in the southern Mediterranean and thus the Arab world, and pro-actively confronting regional crises, such as brain drain, poverty and youth unemployment. The latest census published by the United Nations Economic and Social Council of West Asia (ESCWA) reaffirms the demographic development of youth in Arab societies, thus generating a call to pay attention to this part of society if an integral and authentic reform process is to be implemented.

A case in point as regards the youth percentage in Arab countries is the Jordanian National census which, in 1994, showed that 79.9% of the total population was aged 0-34 years. Likewise, the same age range constituted 79.2% of the population of the Syrian Arab Republic in that same year¹⁰. In Lebanon, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "youth constitute one-fifth of the population despite high emigration that has recently been especially sharp again"¹¹.

It is usual for young people worldwide "for a reason or another [to be] excluded from many political processes and denied many rights most adults take for granted"¹² and unfortunately this applies to the Arab southern Mediterranean too. Widespread marginalization of young people from decision-making processes makes the matter of studying youth participation in the decision making process, as well as their role as actors of political development and reform in the Arab states, a primary subject for research studies. In fact, the marginalization of young people in any political process in the southern Mediterranean is a policy in itself.

In this context, it is important to note that advocating young people's contribution to reform should not be the goal in itself; rather it should be regarded as a tool for reinforcing democratic practices and building permanent channels of participation. For this reason, exploring the main channels through which young people can get in contact with the different levels of government and relate them to the concept of democracy, representation and youth participation are two sides of the same coin.

For instance, within European institutions, political actors have agreed on a structured 'trialogue' connecting public authorities, civil society and the research community. This is called 'the magic triangle', which aims at more transparency and better governance, especially in the youth field¹³.

Research objectives

The aim of this study is to analyze the role of young people as actors in (potential) processes of political reform. Specifically, the study aims at

- Examining the degree of young people's involvement in political reform
- Discovering the ways in which young people are involved in the reform process
- Determining their scope of influence vis-à-vis reforms which are usually initiated in a top-down manner
- Developing recommendations to enhance youth empowerment in the southern Mediterranean area

This study is based on a questionnaire that was jointly developed by the NSC and the LCPS and submitted to a total of 42 young people in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The target group consisted of young people aged between 18 and 30, most of whom had participated in the North South Centre's Annual University on Youth and Development and other Euro-Mediterranean activities organized by the Council of Europe. This target group was divided

7 Amy Hawthorne, A New Reform Ferment, in *Uncharted Journey, Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway (Ed.), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005, p.70. 8 Amy Hawthorne, *Ibid.*, p.71.

9 King Abdullah II in Jordan, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in Bahrain, King Muhamad VI in Morocco and Bashar Al Assad in Syria.

into two categories, the first of which included those who were actively involved in civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or political parties etc, i.e. those who had already experienced a certain degree of political participation in the past. The second category comprised those who had never actively participated in public life and thus had no relevant experience in that regard. In addition, two researchers from the three countries studied were asked about youth policies and youth participation.

This study is based on qualitative research techniques, to the extent that a questionnaire (see appendices 1 and 2) outlining both the key themes and the specific issues relevant in each country under study was submitted to the abovementioned sample group. The questionnaire was drafted in a semi-structured manner in order to allow for some degree of flexibility and give interviewees the opportunity to raise and comment upon issues that were either of particular relevance to them as individuals or to their countries of origin.

The main difficulties that were encountered in terms of method had to do with the following two aspects. 1) The three countries under investigation do not have similar political systems. Their political systems vary between parliamentary in Lebanon, monarchic in Jordan and single-party rule in Syria, and their structure affected the responses of the interviewees. 2.) Whereas no significant difficulties were encountered in conducting the study in Lebanon and Jordan, a large number of young people in Syria preferred not to answer a number of questions that were directly linked to politics.

This study is not intended to be theoretical in nature; it rather reflects the realities of the situation of youth in the countries studied. It is therefore not pertinent to some theories on youth participation in the West since the socio-political context is considerably different.

The study is divided into five sections. The first section explores young people's understanding and perceptions of politics, political leaders and political institutions. It is followed by a section that explores political participation as a tool for promoting (political) reform. The third section analyzes the factors that shape youth's interest or disinterest in public life in a regime-specific context. The fourth section identifies the ways in which reform can be reinforced and section five puts forward relevant recommendations on investing in youth as much-needed actors of reform and political development.

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Research design and methods

Coverage of the report

¹⁰ <http://css.escwa.org.lb/Abstract/chap01/swf/1-2.swf>

¹¹ <http://www.undp.org/execution/word/DPCCFLEB2.doc>. (paragraph 42). It should be noted that no official census has been conducted in Lebanon since 1932.

¹² Judith Bessant, *Ibid.* p.87.

¹³ Peter Lauritzen, Euro-Mediterranean Co-Operation in the field of youth – towards an approach on youth policy development, Strasbourg, 25-04-06; Cited in the report "Round-table on Research and Youth Policy Development in the Euro-Med Cooperation Framework", 2006.

1. Perceptions of Politics, Politicians and Political Institutions: Youth as a Driving Force for Reforms?

This chapter identifies youth's attitudes and patterns of behaviour vis-à-vis major components in the political arena, such as political actors and institutions. It will show the extent to which youth perception is influenced by politicians' or political actors' performance, particularly regarding the role of political institutions in terms of trust¹⁴. According to their perceptions, do they feel that reform is possible? If young people have a negative view of politicians and the prevailing political system, what would push them to be considered as the main agents of reform?

According to Andrew Heywood, "politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity in which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live"¹⁵. This definition sheds light on the importance of people's contribution to amending rules. Based on that, politics is the area that encompasses issues related to regulating daily life in a given country. Thus, it aims at responding positively to their demands and expectations.

When asked about the first thing that came to mind when hearing the word politics, answers were wide-ranging among the respondents from the three countries. Yet, there was a common negative undertone associated with the concept of "politics". This trend is mainly due to the daily political practices as perceived by the public, and thus all answers were confined to practical actions (physical or moral) generated by political interaction.

In Lebanon, according to many interviewees, politics is synonymous with "conflict, war, confessionalism, and headache". In Jordan, politics seem to be more related to diverse notions, such as "taboo, foreign policy, competition between the East and the West; politics is a question of survival of conducting interest." As for Syria, the term politics for those who dared to reflect on it was exclusively related to notions, such as "oppression, jail and restrictions".

Another important aspect of understanding the term politics is the scope of its meaning. Numerous researchers who have tackled the issue of political concepts have discovered that young people tend to mix and equate the term "politics" with domestic politics rather than considering other spheres, such as universities, local government etc. The research results show that the vast majority of young people feel distant from politics as if it were something that was out of reach or could not be dealt with. According to one of the interviewees "politics is something out of reach; it is a mere game fabricated in dark rooms".

A recent study on youth perception in politics shows that, contrary to the findings of many predominantly quantitative studies of political participation, young people are in fact interested in political matters and do support democratic processes. However, very often they have a sense of anti-climax after voting for the first time, and are critical of those who have been elected to positions of power¹⁶. In fact, this was reflected in the Lebanese, Jordanian and Syrian cases.

The majority of those interviewed in Lebanon, regardless of whether they were politically involved or not, were highly opinionated with respect to political issues. Even if they are unable to influence political attitudes, they remain highly involved in criticizing or defending political positions. Undoubtedly, one major reason for their negative perception of politics is daily political practice and politicians' way of doing politics. Therefore, and that is rather noteworthy, young people do not distinguish politics from politicians, but consider them as complementary complexes.

The western approach to leadership differs significantly from the concepts of leadership characteristics in the Arab world, where the choice of a leader falls upon the influence of primordial loyalties¹⁷ (familial affiliations) or military symbols. Such instances were found in the study sample. For instance, when asked about a "political leader", young Lebanese people thought immediately of leaders and political actors influencing the current situation in their country. Every time they mentioned the name of a political leader, such as Hassan Nasrallah, Bashir Gemayel¹⁸ or others, respondents added adjectives such as "loyal" and "confident". Moreover, this was not only restricted to dominant, well-known politicians but also to a wide variety of personalities involved in public life.

However, for the majority of those who expressed themselves regarding the matter in Jordan, the political leaders' strategy came first. Yet, names were only limited to figures in the royal family, mainly King Abdullah and Queen Rania, specifically considering the latter's "direct contact with youth concerns and issues"¹⁹. When elaborating on the leader's characteristics, only positive aspects of the King prevailed, such as being "a leader with a strategy", or being "calm", "wise" and "loyal to Jordan". No other politicians were named.

Likewise, the few who answered this question in Syria gave a vague answer, with only one reference to the President of the Arab Syrian Republic: “A leader is someone who doesn’t oppress the people.” or “A political leader is someone who does everything to guarantee the security and prosperity of the nation, and the best example is Mr. President Bashar El-Assad, following the steps of his father President Hafez El- Assad”.

The findings of the questionnaire revealed that “freedom margin” and political tolerance directly affect political attitudes and perceptions of politicians. In addition, according to respondents in Syria and Jordan and to a lesser extent in Lebanon, there is a heavily emphasized hegemony of the leader and, as such, the idea of any potential reforms is directly linked with this leader and corresponds to the abovementioned notion that top-down approaches predominate.

Furnham and Gunter²⁰ found that young people aged between 10 and 22 generally knew who political leaders were, but lacked an understanding of how political systems worked. This view was confirmed by the interviews held in all of the three countries. From the interviewees’ point of view, an observation that a political leader is the link between politics and the political system was overwhelming, since access to politics and the political system were associated with the political leader.

In Syria, politics were closely associated with the concepts of taboo and jail. This is obviously the result of the existence of a single political party, the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party²¹ and its heavy domination of political life. Jordan, on the other hand, shows more flexibility when it comes to the perception of politics in general, due to the variety of political parties and a more active civil society, regardless of whether or not young people’s participation falls under the terms of democratic practices²². Lebanon, however, occasionally sees an oscillating relationship between opposition and government. The fact that politics was perceived as a source of conflict in Lebanon may be explained as a direct result of the high polarization among the different political factions²³. In other words, every political situation generates different political attitudes and cultures.

In general, political institutions are the watchdog of political life. They are vital elements that tune and adjust its daily performance. The result is that, when these institutions function properly, it is indeed a technique that keeps politicians from potential deviations in their promises of reform. Hence, political life will be corrected under the patronage of those institutions.

According to Wonbin Cho, “Political institutions mediate the relationship between citizens’ political status i.e. winners, non-partisans or losers and their satisfaction with the way Democracy works in their country”²⁴. If political institutions were related to democratic practices, none of the study’s target groups would consider their country to be fully democratic and thus able to promote reforms.

The general perceptions in Lebanon and Jordan were that there was a “democracy in progress” and a “democracy with limits”, while in Syria the response was a meaningful smile or interviewees either chose not to answer or asked whether these questions had to be asked.

The responses confirmed that there was an immense lack of information as well as little knowledge about the role and work of political institutions as such. Some responses, mainly in Syria and to a lesser extent in Jordan, mixed up the institutions themselves and the people in charge. “Indeed I know that the ministries are political institutions, but I am not sure about the way they function because there is lack of transparency and ambiguity in the work they do” is a meaningful example of an answer given by a Jordanian interviewee. In Lebanon answers tended to be very similar in that they related to existing political parties. “I know that the major political institutions are the political parties. Unfortunately, in Lebanon they do not correspond to the main criteria that define a political institution. In fact, political parties are far from being institutionalized, as they are personalized and the major decisions rest in the hands of the leader. The leader does not change during his life. He succeeded his father and he will pass the power to his son”.

Research has shown that, irrespective of how active young people participate in public life, they are not necessarily aware of the functions and roles of political institutions. Lately, however, younger age groups have begun to function as the vanguard of a new generation of “critical citizens” who, in turn, tend to be more sceptical about the performance of political institutions, but deeply committed to democratic norms and tolerance at the same time²⁵. This reality is clearly shown in this study, as a large degree of scepticism is displayed vis-à-vis political institutions, political leaders and politics in general.

14 See Judith Torney-Purta, Carolyn Henry Barber & Wendy Klandl Richardson, Trust in Government-related Institutions and Political Engagement among Adolescents in Six Countries, *Acta Politica*, December 2004, Volume 39, Number 4, pp.380-406.

15 Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, Macmillan Foundations, 1997, p.4.

16 On this topic see Matt Henn, Mark Weinstein, Dominic Wring, *A Generation Apart? Youth and Political Participation in Britain*, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Volume 4, Issue 2, June 2002.

17 See Arnold Hottinger, *Zu’ama in historical perspective*, in *Politics in Lebanon*, Leonard Binder (Ed.), New York, London, Sydney, 1966. pp.85-105.

18 Hassan Nasrallah is the General Secretary of the Shi’a party Hizballah and Bashir Gemayel was the President of the Lebanese Republic before he was assassinated in 1982.

19 For references check Queen Rania’s Website: www.queenrania.jo

2. Political Participation as a Tool for Promoting Reforms

2.1. Participation or alienation?

Undoubtedly, political participation is a major field of study in political science and in many societies it is seen as an answer and thus a remedy to many problems, such as bureaucratization, alienation and lack of political and economic development²⁶. In the words of Scaff, political participation “has generally expressed the idea of sharing or taking part with others in some kind of common activity”²⁷. With time, political the concept of participation began to encompass youth to the extent that “the later part of the twentieth century was characterized by the almost complete collapse of the full-time youth labor, a restructuring of global and national labor and heightened public concern about a range of problems [...]. In this context, youth participation began developing as a key for preventing and remedying a range of youth and social problems. By the late 1960s and in the early 2000s it featured in most youth policy documents”²⁸.

Etymologically “participation” or “to take part” derives from the Latin *pars* (part) combined with *capere* (to take or seize), and was introduced into English alongside the Anglo-Saxon verb “to share” (derived from *sceran*, to cut or divide)²⁹. Based on this meaning, it is noted that participation is not merely based on the ability to express personal ideas, thoughts and opinions in a certain context, but to also take part and share a common activity in public life. This is to say that, according to this study, young people in the three countries in question do not participate politically in public life in its real sense as they are – and actually perceive that they are – disconnected from the decision-making process. Still, they might be able to express their own opinions and comment on a decision which they consider to be an expression of political participation. Interestingly, the latter was confirmed by one of the respondents when he stated that “political participation is when all different levels of society including males and females can express themselves and give their opinion.”

Clearly, this does not necessarily mean that young people are totally alienated as regards political activity. For example, Dubois³⁰ shows that young people’s interest in single issues has encouraged them to participate in what she calls “ad-hoc” groups which, in turn, focus on issues such as environmental protection, human rights defence, race and sexuality.

In a way, this observation could also be made in the target group to which the questionnaire was submitted. Most of those who were active and willing to participate were involved in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in different fields, such as human rights, promoting dialogue and democracy etc. For example, in Lebanon 71.4% of the active respondents were active within NGOs while in Jordan only one respondent was, but is no longer, a member of a political party. None of those interviewed who were members of an association played an active role on the decision-making level within their organization or even in bodies such as the advisory board. Despite the relatively high level of commitment on the part of young people who are active in public life, it is important to note that they are still distant from the decision-making process which, in a way, completes the sphere of their participation, as defined above. Moreover, it was alarming to note that the majority of young people interviewed were not involved in any collective action or campaigns, as this shows that they are only active within the scope of projects and activities which already exist. The study also reveals that their role is limited to the implementation of decisions, as exemplified by the following statement by an interviewee: “I’m mostly afraid that our commitment to NGOs will lead us to become decision recipients rather than decision-makers”.

Political participation is a tool that allows young people to integrate within their societies. “In this way it can be seen how official participation rhetoric draws on traditional accounts of socialization as means of integrating and connecting young people to society”³¹. The most rhetoric jargon on youth issues is found in Jordan and Lebanon. While in the former, high importance is given to youth forums and conferences, which thus have become a major aspect for political socialization of young people, in Lebanon, youth played a major role in certain political activities, such as the demonstrations of 8th and 14th March 2005.

Interestingly, the study revealed that more than 78% of interviewees in Jordan referred to almost the same activities that were launched in Jordan in recent years. It seems as if these channels of socialization and promoting democracy had a positive aspect on youth participation as for some “The political development in Jordan is growing positively in a democratic and educational way. There is a narrow space of democracy and improved communication between the ministry of political development, civil society organizations and youth, such as the Jordanian youth parliament”.

Yet, this raises the question of the extent young people are allowed to take part in the decision-making process. As already mentioned above, there is a general feeling that decision-making is exclusively restricted to political leaders, while it should be within

20 Furnham Adrian & Barrie Gunter, *Young people's political knowledge*, Educational Studies, Volume 14, 1987

21 In fact, the National Progressive Front (NPF) in Syria, established in 1972, is a coalition of political parties which support the Socialist and Arab nationalist orientation of the government and accept the leading role in society of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, which remains firmly in control of the NPF. The Front was established by Syrian president Hafiz Al-Asad to provide for a limited degree of participation in government by political parties other than the ruling Ba'ath Party. Its constitution stipulates that the Ba'ath Party controls 50% plus one of the votes in its executive committee. A number of seats in the Syrian parliament are reserved for members of NPF parties other than the Ba'ath Party.

22 For more references on Jordanian Reforms, see Julia Choukair, *Illusive Reform: Jordan's Stubborn Stability*, Carnegie papers no. 76, December 2006.

23 14th and 8th March 2005 are the two days that witnessed the biggest demonstrations in the streets of Beirut responding to the call from their political parties in an attempt to display public opinion.

24 Wonbin Cho, *Political Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Working paper No. 39, 2004, Mid West Political Science Association Meeting, Chicago, 15 April–18 2004, p.6.

25 Norris, P. (Ed.), *Critical Citizen*. Global Support for Democratic Governance, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, cited in Marc Hooghe, *Political Socialization and the future of Politics*, *Acta Politica*, December 2004, vol. 39, no. 4, p.333.

everyone's reach. Clearly, there is a gap between the political elite which, at least rhetorically, is promoting participation, but is actually far away from its implementation. In the words of one interviewee, "The political process is fake, they give us the space but they don't listen." Based on our analysis of the statements made by the interviewees, there is obviously a missing link between the will to participate and the possibility of making it real. In fact, youth's fear is that all the interest that is being displayed by the political elite with regard to youth-related issues is borne out of mere political considerations rather than out of an authentic will to invest in youth and to consider it as a resource with respect to reform and development. Thus, statements such as the following one, made by a young Lebanese, are somewhat representative of the general attitude. "I feel disappointed as we were all demonstrating in the streets demanding change, but unfortunately now everything is in the hands of the political elite again, who seems to have forgotten everything we were trying to achieve for our country".

Another important tool that undoubtedly has the potential to reinforce participation is elections, as they provide for a space in which democratic practices can be learned and fostered. In this regard, the situation in Syria is rather critical³², as all those who vote neither experience freedom in the actual process, nor show any enthusiasm to change the nature of elections. In fact, young Syrian people do not relate elections to concepts such as accountability or transparency, but rather as a means of reinforcing the regime's power monopoly.

Given the nature of the political systems, it did not come as a surprise that young Lebanese and Jordanian people were aware of democratic processes in general, but excluded from potential processes of change. In fact, in Lebanon 42% of the interviewees expressed resistance and opposition to lowering the voting age to eighteen³³. The widespread argument was that they lack sufficient information and thus "don't know the other in the country. How do you want us to vote? This might change the whole political configuration and lead to the destabilization of the political system". Hence, throughout the interviews, a link between being interested in political participation and the actual voting process could not be established. Yet, this does not automatically imply a crisis of participation, as the latter undoubtedly is "neither confined to the electoral process as such, nor is it limited to any particular type of political act such as voting, letter writing, picketing, or political party activity activities"³⁴.

Many people have the right to vote but do not see any important need to have proper information about domestic politics whereas many of those who are interested in the political process do not have the right to vote. This is, in fact, interlinked with the amount of information and knowledge they have about politics in general, since "voting is only one step in the reform process in the country". Hence, given that the electoral process in all three countries under study are either highly controlled or directly (Jordan) or indirectly (Lebanon) manipulated, one of the remaining channels to practice political participation is university elections to relevant student bodies.

Despite the fact that the voting age in Lebanon is 21 years, many young Lebanese people under this age do have the opportunity to practice this right by participating in university elections. However, as this applies only to university students, an important number of young people are not enrolled in higher education institutions remain without any experience in this regard. In contrast, in Jordan students only participate to a certain extent in universities. For example, at the University of Jordan, which is one of the most important universities in the country, only 50% of the student councils are elected by university students, while the other 50% are subject to appointments by the university administration. As this is seen by many as a contradiction to the concept of democracy causing many students to regularly abstain from casting their vote, also "because all the candidates belong to the establishment. They have the same mentality. Universities are a place for recycling political ideas."

While there is a certain degree of political activity in Jordan and even a wider one in Lebanon³⁵, the situation is different in Syria as young people are obliged to join the youth branch of the Ba'ath party from the early stages of adolescence. "In Syria we were obliged to join the Ba'ath party at the age of 14. For some people the party is a way of getting a job. It is a way of succeeding in your life and achieving a degree of personal and individual freedom. This category of people doesn't organize any kind of activities in the universities." Social and cultural activities are also restricted in Syrian universities. In fact, on 26 November 2006 the Syrian Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) held the first trial

2.2. Participation and elections

26 For more references, see Lester Milbrath, *Political Participation, How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics*, Rand McNally, Chicago, 1965 and Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, Harper and Row, New York, 1972.

27 Lawrence A. Scaff, Two concepts of political participation, *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Sep. 1975, p.449.

28 Judith Bessant, *Ibid.*, p.92.

29 Lawrence. A. Scaff, *Ibid.*, 453.

30 Martin Dubois, Values and Attitudes that foster or hinder participation work in public life, in the access of youth to work and participation in Public life, United Nations, Working Papers II, 1980.

31 Judith Bessant, *Ibid.*, p 93.

against eight youths³⁶ arrested for having established a public discussion group on cultural and political issues in Syria. “These students came together based on common principles of secular and democratic principles”³⁷ according to the Syrian for Justice press release. They have been held incommunicado and without access to legal advice since their arrest in 2006.

It is widely claimed that young people with access to higher education are usually the most engaged in terms of political activism, but their activities are not generally perceived as an alternative to formal or mainstream political activity³⁸. Among those interviewed for this study it was obvious that those who were active in public life had attained high levels of education while many uneducated young people were not only not participating in the public sphere, but also did not have the opportunity to do so. In other words, not all educated young people participate, but all those who do participate are educated. Interestingly, it must also be noted that a large number of those who mentioned that they did not have access to higher education, participated at least occasionally in demonstrations, protests and petition signings. In view of this, it can be concluded that young people face a challenge in that, although they have the will and potentially the means to take part in political reform, the rigid nature of Arab state institutions creates many obstacles that might affect their attitudes towards the reform process itself.

According to Norton’s argument, it is a fact that civil society in the region is “often undermined by a deficit in political toleration”. This, in effect, necessitates a “look at the role and characteristics of the state”³⁹ as authoritarianism renders civil society organizations subject to the influence of the regimes or an avant garde. In this context, the report of the European Youth Forum stated that there were different “realities in civil society” and it highlighted the “need for the development of civil society structures that are meant to play a crucial role in the overtaking of the current political and social situation in the region”⁴⁰.

While the last decades have witnessed a sharp increase in the number of youth organizations in the Arab world, it is notable that in Syria, for instance, the number of civil society organizations registered is six⁴¹. In Jordan, even though the number of existing youth organizations is much higher, there is a direct link between these organizations and the government⁴², and youth organizations in general are “very influenced by the charitable approach”⁴³. Among those that are active in Jordan, it is important to note that Islamic youth organizations are rather active and play an important role in daily life, as they are actively involved in defending students’ rights. Lately, for instance, they boycotted the university elections campaigning on the slogan “you slaughtered us”⁴⁴ and they are at the top of another campaign, entitled “you killed us”, aimed at bringing about fair university elections and thus wider participation of young people.⁴⁵

³² The voting age in Syria is 18 and elections take place on the presidential, legislative and municipal level.

³³ It is to be noted that the voting age in Lebanon is 21 years and that there is a broad debate in the country on whether it should be reduced to 18.

³⁴ Sidney Verba, *Democratic Participation*, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *Social Goals and Indicators for American Society*, Volume 2, September 1967, p.56.

³⁵ Student bodies have a major role in Lebanese universities, as they reflect the national political configuration. During the 2006 elections, the University administration of the AUB decided not to declare the results of the elections as it feared that it might lead to clashes and thus a political crisis.

According to Hisham Sharabi⁴⁶ reform in the Arab world can be analyzed along two lines, i.e. either on a macro (state, political system) or a micro level (family, individuals).

These categories were classified on the basis of answers given by each interviewee in the course of this research and the relevant interest levels of youth have been regrouped into three categories: (1) those with no interest in politics at all, (2) those with some degree of interest in politics and (3) those who are highly interested in politics. During the evaluation of the questionnaires, it became obvious that each group had common experiences, ideas, and most importantly, lives in a social sphere where most individuals share similar sentiments and reactions towards politics, not least due to primary and secondary socialization.

Those who fall under this category are not involved in any political activity and the following statement made by one interviewee is therefore representative of this group: "If you ask me, I am not concerned at all either with politics or with change". Yet, in spite of the fact that they did not express any interest in politics, some young people were expressive when it came to discussing their opinion of politicians. They confirmed their complete distrust of politicians, political institutions and the government. Interestingly, there was a well-developed correlation between lack of interest in politics and a lack of friends who might be interested in politics at least to some degree. As for access to sources of information about politics, it seems that people in this category deliberately avoid contact with sources that relate to politics and political issues, as they simply have no interest at all in reading or even listening to the political news. While they "take an occasional look at the newspaper" they "watch the TV news only very infrequently".

As for those who reported having some degree of interest in politics, these are individuals who read newspapers on a weekly basis and discuss politics from time to time with friends and family members. Yet, their knowledge of politics is restricted to basic elements and lacks deeper information on issues related to domestic politics. This is undoubtedly exemplified by statements such as the following by one interviewee: "It is important to have some information about politics, but at the same time it is too much of a complicated thing". Nevertheless, statements such as "I am not very interested in details of politics but I have participated in demonstrations for the national cause, as this is my country, at the end of the day" reveal that young people in this category have participated in societal activities, and thus care more than the above-mentioned group about their own role in society, as well as about the development of society itself. Yet, again, this has to be qualified to the extent that the expressed interest relates mainly to politics in general and thus shows some degree of disinterest vis-à-vis daily politics and thus local politics.

In contrast to those with no or just some interest in politics, the majority of interviewees expressed a strong interest in, and thus commitment to, politics. They consume the news on a daily basis, watch relevant TV debates and are regular participants in conferences and forums, though the latter is dependent on the time and venue of the events. Moreover, individuals in this group express their high level of knowledge with confidence and trust, as exemplified in statements such as, "Of course I am interested in politics; this is a part of my way of life". Despite the fact that they do not trust their individual governments, just as their peers in the two preceding groups, this third category of young people in all three countries has high standards of information as regards the way political institutions function both domestically and internationally. This interest is visibly translated into intense participation in public life, and as these individuals are surrounded by people who share the same interests they are given the opportunity to discuss political matters on a regular basis. It goes without saying that this, in turn, keeps them updated and triggers their efforts to maintain their level of relevant knowledge.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that it was difficult for the young people in the first two categories to express the underlying reasons of their lack of interest. Statements, such as "I am not sure why I don't like politics; it is just a feeling" were very common and thus self-explanatory. In contrast, it appeared to be much easier for the third group of young people to affirm their interest and to explain why it was well-developed. As the following statement by one interviewee clearly shows, this group is intrinsically motivated and cares about societal and thus political developments as such: "I am happy to be involved in politics, as I want to improve my country's situation and represent a good example to people of my age".

Our assessment of the questionnaires revealed the importance of strong links between family and politics. The majority of those who showed no interest in politics did not have any members of their nuclear family who were involved in or cared about politics.

3. Political Reforms between Change and Stagnation

Category 1 Young people with no interest in politics

Category 2 Young people with some degree of interest in politics

Category 3 Young people with a high degree of interest in politics

³⁶ The imprisoned students are Husam Mulhim (22 years old, second year student at the Faculty of Law at the University of Damascus), a poet who organized poetry readings and lectures at the University; Omar Al Abdullah (21 years old, young writer and second year student of philosophy at the University of Damascus) who was first arrested and held for 11 days for discussing youth issues with a group of young students in 2004 is the son of activist and writer Ali Al Abdullah, a former prisoner of conscience in Syria; Ali Nazir Ali (22 years old, young writer and second year business student at the University of Damascus); Allam Atieh Fakhour (27 years old, graduate of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Damascus); Aliham Muhamad Sakr (30 years old, writer); Tarek Ghorani (21 years old, associate engineer and writer); Maher Esper (26 years old, writer); Diab Surrieh (21 years old, student and writer).

³⁷ <http://www.syrianayouthforjustice.org>

³⁸ John Bynner and Ashford S. "Politics and participation: Some antecedents of young people's attitude to the political system and political activity", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Volume 24, No.2, 1994.

³⁹ August Richard Norton, *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Volume 1, E.J Brill, 1995, pp. 33-11.

⁴⁰ 0369-05 UN&Global. Report steering group on the middle east youth initiative study visit (Lebanon, Syria and Jordan) 11:8 December 2006 p.4-5.

⁴¹ 0369-05 UN&Global Ibid. Report, p.8.

⁴² For instance the "Youth Parliament" meets regularly on the premises of the Ministry of Political Development and under the supervision of the Minister.

⁴³ 0369-05 UN&Global, Report, p.5.

⁴⁴ In Arabic the campaign is called "Hamlat Zabahtouna".

⁴⁵ See "The Islamists and the leftist movement boycott the Elections at University of Jordan", in *Al Ghad Newspaper*, 6-5-2007 (<http://alghad.dot.jo/index.php?news=171929>).

Interestingly, though to a much lesser degree, this also applied to the third group, which, however, compensated for this lack of interest among family members through the acquisition of relevant individual skills and greater personal autonomy: “I don’t care if my brother participates or not, let him stay at home. I believe in what I am doing and this is my decision”. In view of this, it is also somewhat obvious that family background cannot necessarily be considered a decisive factor with respect to youth in Jordan, Syria or Lebanon developing high or low degrees of interest in politics. For instance, some parents told their children “not to get involved in politics”.

In this regard, the Arab family has been subject to much research and qualified by Sharabi as a patriarchal one, where basic internal relations are characterized by “authority and submission”. In his work, Sharabi calls on the distinguished work done by the Lebanese social psychologist Ali Zay’our, in his analysis of the patriarchal family in the Arab world. According to Zay’our, “The family is relentless in its repression. The child is brought up to become an obedient youth, subservient to those above him-his father, older brother, clan chief, president”⁴⁷. This pessimistic approach to the Arab family and its influence on children’s evolution has been linked to the political system’s configuration.⁴⁸

In this study, it was shown that the majority of those interviewed were still living with their parents. Based on Sharabi’s structural analysis of society, it is legitimate to deduce that young people are still affected by their parents’ decisions. This is also coupled with another aspect of the patriarchal family, namely economic dependence. According to this study, young people remain unemployed in most cases. Few are economically independent from their parents and this has direct reflections and repercussions on their political attitudes and their ability to change the current status quo, making reform difficult. Sharabi concludes that this configuration helps “in putting conformity above originality and obedience before autonomy, it crushes creative talent and encourages only those powers that help to maintain it”⁴⁹.

Sharabi’s observations apply very much to the youth group in the study, as the majority of interviewees in the three countries lived with their parents, and were economically dependent on them. Only the very few that lived alone had left their villages in the rural periphery and moved to urban areas in order to work or study. It should be noted that, in most cases, young people only leave the family home when they marry (irrespective of whether they are male or female). However, even after having left, most young people maintain strong parental ties and tend to continue to rely on their parents’ income.

As for those who displayed an interest in politics, the first reason behind their motivation, as it appears from the study’s outcome, is that they are oriented towards a will and commitment to try and change their societies for the better. These potential reform actors understand that potential change is promising as they believe in their actions, as well as in their ability to get politicians to respond to their opinions. This can be observed in particular in Jordan, where “the King is directly interested in youth issues, and where all activities are done under his personal and direct supervision and patronage”. Conversely, in Jordan the will to change was strongly associated with the King himself, as well as with some politicians or political institutions, such as the Ministry of Political Development. In contrast, the situation is different in Lebanon and Syria. In fact, none of the Lebanese respondents mentioned the Ministry of Youth and Sport or linked the desire to change to the role of politicians. “Politicians were there to tell us that we were creating the future of Lebanon and when everything ended they did not ask about us at all”. As for Syria, the picture is even bleaker, as interest in change is considered to be a “dream” for some and an “impossible step” for others.

Still, young people with high levels of interest in political participation seem to make the link between participation and citizenship. This fact reflects wide scales of understanding of the purpose and responsibilities of participation those individuals have and it echoes a clear sense of civic responsibility that was displayed by those interviewed and principally by those participating in the political space. Moreover, it shows that the young people who were interviewed have a sincere interest in following politics to “keep politicians accountable in the coming elections”.

Another factor affecting this interest in politics is undoubtedly the role of universities as major initiators. “The university was a turning point in my life; I got to know different political parties and got informed about the work of civil society”. Clearly, both factors, i.e. becoming a university student and experiencing the first voting opportunity in the framework of student cabinet elections, are decisive with respect to getting youth involved in the political process. Lack of awareness plays an additional role. “In school we were not allowed to talk about politics. They were even afraid to hold elections to choose the class representative He or she was named by the parents’ committee”.

In this context, the level of youth participation in these channels translates directly into a wider sphere of participation which flows in the direction of public life, such as influencing political decision-makers. Hence, the question remains whether the system represents an obstacle if personal motivation exists.

Based on these observations and general remarks made by many interviewees, such as “politics is annoying”, or “politics is present everywhere”, it is somewhat obvious that scepticism vis-à-vis real reforms remains a common denominator that induces either interest or disinterest in politics. As already mentioned above, whether young people are truly interested or only slightly interested, the fact remains that they cannot produce real change. This is directly related to the system itself and the fact that reforms are being implemented from above not only in the three countries in question, but in the entire southern Mediterranean.

Hence, as regards the political system, the majority of those that were interviewed, whether active or not in the political domain, unanimously agreed that the system was operating without any contribution on their part and reiterated their general sense of frustration over their lack of political opportunities. For example, 64.2 % of the Lebanese interviewees believe that they cannot contribute to political change as opposed to a much more positive perception by the Jordanian respondents, though they always pointed to the King’s prerogatives. Interestingly, in Lebanon, most replies were characterized by an agreement on the significance of solving problems and promoting political change through international channels and in collaboration with international institutions, such as the UN, the EU or the Council of Europe.

Lebanon, over the past two years, has witnessed an extremely instable political situation. It was subjected to several United Nations Security Council resolutions (1559, 1701 etc) and the political elite was unable to reach significant solutions through the National Dialogue, which was initiated by the Speaker of the Chamber. As noted above, this directly affected the answers of the interviewees. In contrast, the political situation in Syria is extremely difficult too, though for reasons related to the regime’s subtle confrontationalism and its totalitarian characteristics. This, unsurprisingly, has affected respondents to the extent that a large number of them believe that change is impossible and that stagnation, which has been prevailing for years, will remain for years to come. Yet, some do believe that political transformation is possible, but seem to be waiting for “someone to bring change during a transitional phase”, as was, for example, reflected by the “Damascus Declaration” of 2005, calling openly for peaceful “regime change”⁵⁰.

Besides their conviction that politicians cannot make a difference, as is expressed in statements of some interviewees, such as “politicians just talk, they have no will or ability to change” or “politicians are unable to change”, young people sense that they are powerless in influencing the political elite. Throughout the interviews, this was a red thread, as it was confirmed that the large majority of those interviewed had never had any contact with a politician either on the local or on the national level. This issue sheds light on the so-called “distant proximity” paradigm between politicians and their electorate, which has contributed to a crisis of democratic participation and thus political apathy.

On the other hand, a large number of those who do participate and are interested in politics strongly believe in themselves and have high self-esteem that generates a certain degree of enthusiasm, regardless of all existing obstacles. This fact was noted, for instance, in the case of Jordanian youth, who expressed a strong interest in youth issues. In fact, more than half of those who do participate in public activities have upcoming plans and political ambitions for the future and even envisage a career either at ministerial or parliamentary level. 57.1% of all the Jordanians interviewed mentioned a seat in the parliament as their ultimate career goal. This stands in sharp contrast to the young people in Lebanon, who, although being the most active and enthusiastic as regards the issue of political change, remain attached to the idea of leaving the country “until a better situation arrives”. In fact, 85.7 % of the Lebanese interviewees want to leave the country. In part, this can be explained by the fact that the issue of security comes first in the order of priorities of Jordanians while it is secondary for the Lebanese.

As for those who want reform in Syria, it became obvious throughout the interviews that they preferred judicial reform to secure their own personal freedom in the first place. As for the other variables in the questionnaire, few of the interviewees replied that separation of religion and politics and equality and gender were important factors in the framework of promoting reform.

In view of this, it is imperative from a youth perspective to find ways and potential channels that can foster reform within the prevailing political systems where young people can obtain a significant role.

46 Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

47 Zay’our, *Psychoanalysis of the Arab Self*, Beirut, 1997 (in Arabic), p.34, cited by Sharabi Hisham, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, Oxford University Press, 1988, p.41.

48 Sharabi, *Ibid*, p.42.
49 Hisham Sharabi, *Ibid* p. 47.

4. Three Channels for Political Reform

The southern Mediterranean is an area where “presidents and kings remain powerful, untrammelled by the limits imposed by effective parliaments and independent judiciaries. Countervailing institutions remain weak, if they exist at all, not only because constitutions and laws deliberately keep them that way, but also because they are not backed by organized citizens demanding political rights, participation, and government accountability.”⁵¹ Ottaway’s analysis raises the question of the extent to which the major cohort, in southern Mediterranean societies, i.e. young people, fights for its political rights and through which channels the latter can be attained.

As a starting point, it is essential to explore whether young people consider themselves as a resource with regard to change and democratic reform. In fact, 83.3% of the interviewees, regardless of whether they had experienced participation, confirmed that they were strong believers in their principle potential as actors in any process of reform, and showed a great degree of conviction that their participation could make a major difference, as reflected by statements such as “Of course we are a powerful source for change; we want it and we work towards its promotion”. However, we should recall that there is an important gap between the will to promote change and the capacity of making it a reality. Besides their determination to promote change, 71.4% of the interviewees seemed sceptical about their ability to translate this will into a political reality.

With this in mind, it is important to note that none of the interviewees could name or give any sort of tangible, clear or substantial channel of participation. In other words, although some of them are exploring these channels, they are not aware of their importance in the evolution and reinforcement of their ability to push for change and contribute to reforms. “We are all mobilized during the university elections. It becomes a simulation of parliamentary elections, but in the end we cannot even exert pressure on the administration to cut tuition fees or even facilitate other administrative processes”.

Hence, it can be concluded that democratic participation is in crisis in all of the three countries, though it is important to point out (again) that “participatory democracy is not an all-or-nothing thing; every society allows some means of participation for some citizens, and no society is run on the basis of equal participation by all citizens”⁵². On the other hand, it is indeed a must to mention that the “focus on democratic participation requires that one looks beyond the relationship between citizen and government to the relations between individuals, and authorities in the families, schools, organizations, and other nongovernmental institutions to which individuals belong”⁵³. “If, in the crucial social institutions with which the individual first has contact, the family and the school, he comes to consider it normal to have his fate decided by unresponsive and authoritarian decision-makers, he may be more likely to expect and accept such decision making in the political sphere as well”⁵⁴.

Political parties are a focal channel for the reinforcement of participation and have the potential to contribute to the promotion of reform in a given country. Certainly, “political parties do indeed play an important role in causing authoritarian states’ transitions to democratic ones as well as helping democratic nations remain democracies”⁵⁵. When asked about the functions of political parties, hardly any of the respondents was fully aware of their exact meaning and purpose: “There is a tendency among youth to look negatively at political parties. They see them as institutions with active roles to be mentioned, and they are just groups with old-fashioned ways of thinking where parochial interests gathered them”. This statement made by one interviewee emphasizes the pure clientel aspect of a political party in the studied countries: “Political parties are regarded as opportunities to get access to the labour market and other benefits. They are mainly based on confessional structure” in the Lebanese case, while in Jordan they reflect the tribal affiliations that characterize the Jordanian societal structure.

In general, none of the respondents reflected a positive attitude towards the present political party, although they were aware of the real functions and tasks of a political party in general. In fact, “Political party life is determined primarily by the attitudes of the ruling regimes and the political environment in which parties operate. The lack of internal party democracy and the weakness of opposition parties are related to the lack of a level playing field for political parties and a generally undeveloped role for parties in the political system”⁵⁶.

In comparison to western concepts of political parties and the individual’s expectations of what they should provide, the interviews brought to the fore that the present status quo of the political parties in the countries studied were associated with the notion of clientelist politics and far from youth’s expectations of reform. When efforts towards reform

⁵⁰ For more information about reform in Syria see: Samir Aita, Syria, What reforms while a storm is building? Arab Reform Initiative, April 2006.

are supposed to be based on an institutionalized approach and adopt the form of a party initiative, it is rather taken to individualistic ingenuity and associated with the figure of the party leader instead of the political party itself.

In the southern Mediterranean, policy-making remains based on unilateral decisions taken by governmental or royal elites and thus young people, as pointed out before, are principally excluded from the policy-making process in all of these three countries. Due to this exclusion, it is important to insist on their role at least within civil society organizations, and this, in turn, highlights the important role of NGOs with regard to opening a space for youth participation. Yet, they face the problem that they are not given the opportunity to substitute political parties, which are supposed to provide primarily political education, but rather aim at awareness-raising in society, in addition to their advanced role in the field of advocacy. It goes without saying that this reality makes NGOs an important arena for socialization on democratic performance and culture rather than one for promoting change and helping its implementation. NGOs have to counterbalance the state because the more they do so, the more young people are able to participate and lobby for further reforms.

As such, most of the NGOs in the Arab World are in the hands of the political system and their role is limited to awareness-raising only. But the findings of the questionnaires show that awareness needs to be temporarily subordinated to advocacy, and that local NGOs are in urgent need to implement democracy internally. Yet, given that political parties and NGOs are manipulated by political systems and in view of the fact that collective action for reform can be challenged by the rigidity of the regimes on the macro-level, the virtual space for communication, i.e. the internet, is spreading in the Arab world and is crossing the boundaries of regimes.

The virtual space for communication represents an outstanding channel for collecting information and communicating. When asked about their preferred media sources, almost all respondents placed the internet on the top of the list, for the basic reasons that "It is fast, wide and easy to get information from everywhere". Through the internet "Young people are nowadays expressing their opinions about political and related issues, and this in itself is something that cannot be done in newspapers, as they are manipulated by the establishment".

This fact is further elaborated upon through "The Initiative for an Open Arab Internet" in the context of which the report, entitled "Implacable Adversaries: Arab Governments and the Internet", pointed to the important role the e-media are playing in the course of reproducing a network of Arab communities interested in existing reform and change movements, not only within a particular country, but throughout the Arab world. "The internet has provided an opportunity for Arab users to communicate with one another and with other people in the world. Such communication created an electronic unity through forums and interactive websites, especially in light of the similar experiences with regards to their oppressive regimes. Furthermore, Arab blogs have effectively contributed to the creation of harmony among Arab activists and have provided a venue for strong campaigns defending users who have been exposed to violations by their governments."⁵⁷ A Syrian respondent said, "The internet is the only medium through which I can communicate with other people who are promoting change and spreading our ideas worldwide for support."

In addition to these channels of participation, and despite their importance in fostering change, international support remains another aspect for sustaining change and catering for its implementation. After the events of 9/11, an intensive debate in the Middle East over the promotion of democracy and reform in the region emerged and has been further energized by transatlantic discussions as regards Iraq. Even more, the forceful debates supporting political change in the Middle East have led both the United States and European countries to closely examine each other's actual and intended approaches to democracy promotion in the region⁵⁸. Many critical voices were raised against what is known to be the intervention of foreign states in internal affairs⁵⁹. Yet, contrary to the idea that European interests in the Arab world are "restricted, as opposed to the notion that the United States has much more strategic intentions", there were overwhelming sentiments that European states do have a major role to play with regard to matters of change and reform. For example, as far as European institutions and initiatives for Euro-Mediterranean co-operation are concerned, we found that a relatively large number of interviewees in the three countries knew or had participated previously in Euro-Mediterranean activities, either in their own country or in other countries. Yet, there is nonetheless a general unfamiliarity with European institutions and while projects launched by the EU, such as the "Barcelona Process", still remain ambiguous and unknown by respondents, a small fraction of youth in the studied countries is actually familiar with the Council of Europe. This does not change the fact that

51 Marina Ottaway, *The Missing Constituency for Democratic Reform*, in *Uncharted Journey, Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway (Ed.), Carnegie International 2005, p.151.

52 Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1963.

53 Sidney Verba, *Democratic Participation*, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 373, *Social Goals and Indicators for American Society*, Volume 2, September 1967, p.56.

54 Sidney Verba, *ibid.* p.56.

55 Brian Lai and Ruth Melkonian-Hoover, "Democratic Progress and Regress: The Effect of Parties on the Transitions of States to and away from Democracy", in *Political Research Quarterly*, 2005, Vol. 58, No. 4, 551-564.

56 *Democracy in the Arab World, An overview of the International IDEA project, 2003-2004*

few are involved in projects by European institutions, and, if they are acquainted with such projects, then this is because of their direct relation to their main field of study, such as political science.

As for development projects, there is in fact a slight overview concerning some projects which “are mostly economics-related”. In general, however, judgements in conjunction with the evaluation by the public of the EU’s work remain ambiguous and murky, as they are constantly subjected to comparison with the USA’s policies in the region.

57 Implacable Adversaries: Arab Governments and the Internet, Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (HR info), Ehab Zelaky, Gamal Eid, Ed. by Sally Sami, 2006. www.openarab.net

58 Richard Youngs, Europe’s Uncertain Pursuit of the Middle East Reform, in *Uncharted Journey, Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, Edited by Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, Carnegie International 2005, p.229.

59 The USA proposed the Greater Middle East Initiative that was viewed sceptically by European governments. In part at the latter’s behest the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative that was eventually agreed on at the Sea Island G-8 summit in June 2004 enshrines a more cautious, partnership-based approach to political reform.

Youth participation in public life in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and its role in political development is an issue that lately has been attracting attention all over the world. Developments, such as the recent decline in voter participation, young people's growing disinterest in politics and the decline in political parties shed light on the importance of the issue of this study.

In this context, spreading the concept of citizenship in the Arab world is crucial, not only as regards citizens' rights, but also with respect to citizen's duties and responsibilities vis-à-vis society and the state. Based on the observations made, there is a broad consensus on the fact that youth participation is imperative for the improvement of public life, political development and reform in the three countries in question. The study substantiates the fact that young people demonstrate a vast interest in assuming their responsibilities in public life in addition to taking part in and contributing to any aspect of political development.

Establishing and reinforcing a reasonable platform for youth participation requires a substantial amount of work. Clearly, bridging the gap between young people and political institutions, informing youth about the importance of their role in potential reform processes, and facilitating participation opportunities by identifying the main participation channels are without doubt the most appropriate first steps that need to be taken.

Based on our observations, we worked out seven basic areas through which young people's desire for participation in public life and reforms can be enhanced to an extent that they may evolve as actors of reform themselves.

1. It is misleading to consider young people as potential reform actors only in a rather distant future. Given the demographic characteristics of Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, they already represent the most important group of society and thus must no longer be ignored.
2. All major studies analyzing the political situation in the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East point to the absence of a truly open decision-making process that is based on principles of inclusion and thus takes societal realities into account. Yet, as young people are the major component in any of the three societies in question, it is imperative for their political, economic and societal development that domestic as well as international promoters of reforms push for (greater) inclusion of youth in the political process.
3. Enlightening young people on the magnitude of their role, independent of their current marginalization, in the political and decision-making processes is a *sine qua non*. Undoubtedly, youth participation is associated with citizenship, and citizenship is a give and take process. With this in view, youth participation should not be regarded as a right to have, but rather as a duty every individual has and thus as the individual's responsibility towards society. Hence, it is important for any actor interested in political reform inside and outside the three countries in question to motivate and empower young people and give them a feeling of belonging and of being able, if only in the long run, to make a difference.
4. As it seems that policy-making in the three countries in question is focusing to a large extent on the ruling elite's efforts of staying in power at the expense of effective and good governance, this rather predominant and somewhat limited approach needs to be gradually broken up, in order to reflect the major concerns of the citizens in policy areas, such as, for instance, education, healthcare, welfare and employment.
5. Young people must not be perceived as a reformist cohort only and thus not as a legion of *coup d'état*, or as forces that aim to destabilize and undermine the existing political establishment in the three countries, as such an approach will help to dilute and eventually undermine the prevailing practices of cooptation.
6. Age matters! The interviews underpinning this study showed that it was the age group under 24 that was mostly in favour of and interested in political participation. Yet, at the same time, it appears to be one of those categories of society that suffer enormously from a clear understanding of the way political institutions and processes work. Against this background, and in view of the negative connotations that revolve around the issue of politics in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, it is somewhat obvious that this group needs to be targeted in particular and provided with the relevant opportunities to become exposed to global education and education for democratic citizenship.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

7. The vast majority of interviewees confirmed the trend that is visible in the entire Middle East with respect to the growing importance of virtual spaces of communication as potential arenas in which political dissatisfaction can be expressed and where attention can be drawn to issues of concern. From a policy point of view, these spaces need to be expanded and supported, and young people need to be encouraged to make use of them in a much broader way. As these spaces are also essential communication tools in an increasingly globalised market, incumbent regimes can no longer afford to meet them with resistance and, in some cases, such as in Syria, outright opposition.

It goes without saying that one of the main reasons why young people should participate in public life to a greater extent than has been the case to date is the simple fact that participation is an important tool for this societal category to express its own ideas on matters that concern their individual problems and interests. In other words, it can be assumed that the young people are most familiar with the challenges they face and hence they possess a relevant knowledge, which, in turn, is indispensable for the political elite once it takes decisions that affect those areas.

In view of this, there are a number of recommendations that can be derived from the various interviews:

- Education, mainly in schools, should emphasize the value of informing students about politics. That is to say that secondary and higher education needs to be mainstreamed and curricula and school books adjusted accordingly. As political participation is a broad concept that touches upon a number of issues, curricula and programmes within schools and universities need to be designed so as to introduce youngsters to the major tools that are at the core of political participation, such as petitions, advocacy, elections and voting.
- Supporting initiatives on a limited scale, at university for example, will provide an incentive for young people to understand that they are a significant potential force. This, in turn, may set in motion a domino effect of sorts and encourage others to increase their degree of participation.
- Any assistance given to the media should be linked to their reporting the need to empower young people as actors of economic and political reform. This entails coverage of issues that relate directly to young people, such as education, labour market, youth participation, religion, etc.
- In order to broaden public participation, the EU, as well as other international actors such as the Council of Europe and the UN, that are aiming to promote reform in the southern Mediterranean, should utilize existing policy frameworks in order to push for electoral reform and the lowering of the voting age to 18. This should be accompanied by measures to create conditions in which young people would be allowed and thus supported to run as candidates themselves. Both measures could lead to greater participation of young people who have hitherto been marginalized.
- The international community should give more active and explicit support to national as well as international youth forums and councils and (co)finance the establishment of training facilities on youth empowerment and citizenship, as this would enable young people to come in contact with like-minded young people from other cities, villages and countries, broaden their horizons and develop as political individuals which develop civic responsibility. In this vein, the Euro-Mediterranean youth program, with an emphasis on youth exchanges, needs to be revitalized and extended to all countries participating in the Barcelona Process.
- As is common practice in Europe, summer academies reaching out to pupils and students in the three countries in question and, in fact, in the whole southern Mediterranean, dealing with issues related to political participation and more general issues, such as human rights, good governance and democracy, should be set up and supported. This needs to be accompanied by a massive expansion of fellowship programmes that allow talented, promising young students to continue their studies abroad.
- Launching and/or reinforcing programmes that aim to spread the internet in different areas, so that young people will have access to information, as well as expressing themselves about issues related to their own problems (regional youth e-network etc.) are priority areas for support.

- In the framework of the Barcelona Process, the European Commission, in collaboration with EMP member states, should revive a series of Euro-Mediterranean youth conferences that would target young people between 18 and 24 and give them an international platform to express and exchange their views.

Whether some of these recommendations can be followed up depends also, at least to a certain extent, on whether young people are given the opportunities to explore the few relevant channels of participation available. However, the study shows that it is not necessarily difficult to monitor the level of participation, but that it is rather problematic for young people to identify channels of participation as such. Interestingly, this problem was expressed particularly by those interviewees who had shown a high degree of interest in politics, and although most have them had experienced participation of sorts, they were unable to name any concrete channels. In a way, this points to a lack of civic culture and the fact that participation is not generated by institutions, but based on personal motivations.

The statement of the winner of the 1979 Nobel Prize in economics, Sir Arthur Lewis, that “all who are affected by a decision should have the chance to participate in making that decision, either directly or through chosen representatives”⁶⁰ encapsulates citizens’ indisputable need to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives directly or indirectly. Hence, marginalizing young people and not considering them as a resource of political and economic development is indeed a violation of the primary meaning of democracy. As stated by Mark Franklin “The future lies at the hand of young people. Young people hold the key to the future because they are the ones who react to new conditions. Older people are, on the whole, too set in their ways to be responsible for social and political change, so most long term change comes about by way of generational replacement”⁶¹.

60 William Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1965, pp.64-65.
61 Franklin, M. (2004) *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Cited in Marc Hooghe, *Political Socialization and the future of Politics*, *Acta Politica*, December 2004, Volume 39, Number 4, p.333.

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Reports and Documents

Websites

7. Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Living conditions of youth in the Southern Mediterranean

Age:

Gender: Female ___ Male ___

Educational Level: Secondary Primary University,

Marital status:

Do you live in your country of origin?

Do you live in a big city, small town or a rural area?

Do you live with your parents? (Yes or No) Why?

Do you have a permanent job? (Yes or No)

Are you financially dependent on your family? If not, do you help your family financially?

Are you engaged in any voluntary work?

What are your career and life plans and what do you want to achieve professionally?

Do you feel that you can implement your career and life plans in your country of residence?

Are you planning to leave your country (Yes or No) and if so, why?

- If you decide to leave your country, do you intend to leave it permanently?
- Imagine that you had already left the country, what were, in your opinion, the incentives that could motivate you to return to your country?

2. The political arena in the countries of the Southern Mediterranean

What comes to your mind when you hear the word "politics"?

How do you see your present and future role as a citizen in your country?

According to you, what sort of subjects or areas should politics cover?

Which media do you prefer and which media do you consider as reliable and informative? How frequently do you use them?

Which political developments do you consider as most relevant in your country?

Describe the state of your country's political development (democratic, authoritarian etc.)

Which political institutions in your country come to your mind?

Do you understand the way political institutions work in your country?

Do you feel that you can be involved - participate in those institutions? How?

Do you (dis-)trust your governmental institutions? Why?

To what extent – and in which way – do you regard political institutions in your country as actors of / an obstacle to democratic reform?

On a scale from 1 to 4, indicate those institutions that you consider as the most effective to generate change and democratic reform in your country: (1 being the highest and 4 being the lowest)

International and global Institutions (UN, World Bank) _____

Regional institutions (Arab League, EU, Council of Europe) _____
 National institutions (Government, Parliament, Political Parties) _____
 Local institutions (Municipalities) _____

How do you define a political leader? Have you ever had any personal contacts with any of the political leaders in your country of residence? If so, under which circumstances?

What do you think of the political parties in your country?

Taking into account your country’s current political climate, do you feel capable of

- a) promoting the change you envision
- b) making it a reality?

How do you define political participation?

Have you ever voted on the local, regional and national level, and if so, why?

If your country of residence is not your country of origin, has your origin any impact on your political participation in your country of residence and if so, how?

Are you a member of a political party, a university club or another organization? If yes, please state which one, the type of membership, as well as the reason of your membership.

Would you define yourself as politically active? Please give reasons for your engagement/ disengagement.

Which factors affect your political attitude the most and how (for example, family, economic, religious and cultural factors,)?

How would you describe your political attitude compared to the one of your parents?

- Has any member of your family ever been involved in political activities?
- Have your parents been encouraging you to participate in political activities?

How would you describe your political attitude compared with the one of your friends and peers?

Have you ever tried to organize a collective action with your friends and get engaged in societal matters?

In your country, are there any channels that facilitate young people’s political participation?

- If yes, state them. To what extent are young people exploring these channels?
- If no, please explain
- What are your personal experiences as regards this issue?

Do you think that young people are – and can act as – a resource as regards change and democratic reform?

- If so, why and how?
- If no, why?

Do you think that young people are included / excluded from the decision-making process in your country? If so, why and how?

Put the following in order: (1 being the most important, 5 being the least important)

Free and Fair Elections (Legislative) _____
 Free and independent media _____
 Separation of religion and politics _____
 Judicial reform _____
 Security _____
 Equity and gender _____
 Other (please define) _____

3. Incentives and impediments to youth contribution to political development and reform in the Southern Mediterranean

4. Youth and European initiatives as regards political development and reforms in the Southern Mediterranean

Have you ever heard about the Barcelona Process or the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)?

- If yes, through which channel, and what do you know?
- If yes, do you think the EMP is a viable and effective tool to promote change and democratic reform in the Southern Mediterranean area? Why?

Have you ever heard of other European initiatives, such as, for example, the Transmediterranean Programme of the Council of Europe's North-South Centre / European Center for Global Interdependence and Solidarity?

Do you know of any European funded programs or projects in your country?

- If yes, what are these?
- What is your general impression of the programs and why? 1) Very positive, 2) Positive 3) Negative 4) Very Negative
- What do you think about the way they are implemented? Why? 1) Very positive, 2) Positive 3) Negative 4) Very Negative

Have you ever participated in an international activity (co-)funded by a European organisation? If yes, when, how and why? If no, do you know someone that has participated?

How do you perceive the EU?

How do you perceive the Council of Europe?

How do you see upon the EU, the USA, or other international actors, such as, for instance, the Council of Europe or the Arab League in the field of democracy promotion?

- What do you think should their role be as regards change and democratic development in your country of residence?

Do you have any additional comment regarding EU policies, or the Council of Europe's engagement, in your country?

"The role of youth as actors of political development and reform in the Southern Mediterranean"

Questionnaire

version directed to researchers

1. The political arena in the countries of the Southern Mediterranean

How do you think young people understand the word "politics"?

How do you see the present and future role of young people as citizens in your country?

According to young people in your country, what sort of subjects or areas should politics cover?

Which media does youth favour and consider most reliable and informative?

Which political developments have most relevance to young people in your country?

Describe the state of your country's political development (democratic, authoritarian etc.)

What national organs do young people consider political institutions?

Do they generally understand how political institutions work in their country?

Is there scope for the participation of youth in these institutions?

What is the level of trust in governmental institutions amongst young people? How do you explain this?

To what extent – and in which way – do young people regard political institutions in your country as actors of / an obstacle to democratic reform?

On a scale from 1 to 4, indicate those institutions considered the most effective in generating change and democratic reform in your country: (1 being the highest and 4 being the lowest)

International and global Institutions (UN, World Bank) _____

Regional institutions (Arab League, EU, Council of Europe) _____

National institutions (Government, Parliament, Political Parties) —
 Local institutions (Municipalities) —

How is a political leader defined by young people?

Is there much personal contact between youth and political leaders in your country of residence? If so, under which circumstances?

How do young people regard the political parties in your country?

Taking into account your country’s current political climate, do you feel that youth is capable of:

- c) promoting the change they envision?
- d) making it a reality?

How do young people in your country define political participation?

How extensive is voting amongst young people, on the local, regional and national level? Why is this?

If one’s country of residence is not one’s country of origin, does this have an impact on the person’s political participation in the country of residence and if so, how?

What is the level of membership amongst youth in political parties, university clubs or other such organizations? Out of these, which type of organisation is most popular?

In your opinion, what are the reasons for the engagement/disengagement of youth in political activities?

Which factors most affect young people’s political attitudes (for example, family, economic, religious and cultural factors)? How are these expressed?

How would you compare the political attitude held by young people versus that of their parents?

How diverse are the political attitudes held by young people in your country?

How commonly do young people organize collective action and get engaged in societal matters?

In your country, are there any channels that facilitate young people’s political participation?

- If yes, state them. To what extent are young people exploring these channels?
- If no, please explain.

Do you think that young people are – and can act as – a resource, as regards change and democratic reform?

- If yes, why and how?
- If no, why?

Do you think that young people are included / excluded from the decision-making process in your country? If so, why and how?

Do you believe that young people share your view?

Put the following in order, with reference to what is deemed important by youth:

(1 being the most important, 5 being the least important)

- Free and Fair Elections (Legislative) —
- Free and independent media —
- Separation of religion and politics —
- Judicial reform —
- Security —
- Equity and gender —
- Other (please define) —

2. Incentives and impediments to youth’s contribution to political development and reform in the Southern Mediterranean

3. Youth and European initiatives as regards political development and reforms in the Southern Mediterranean

Is youth in your country familiar with the Barcelona Process or the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP)?

- If yes, through which channels?

Do you think the EMP is a viable and effective tool to promote change and democratic reform in the Southern Mediterranean area? Why?

How much is known about other European initiatives, such as, for example, the Transmediterranean Programme of the Council of Europe's North-South Centre / European Center for Global Interdependence and Solidarity?

As an expert, what is your general impression of such programs and why?

1) Very positive, 2) Positive 3) Negative 4) Very Negative

What is your evaluation of their implementation and why?

1) Very positive, 2) Positive 3) Negative 4) Very Negative

How widespread is the participation of young people in international activities (co-) funded by a European organisation?

How do you perceive the EU? What is the perception prevalent among youth?

How do you perceive the Council of Europe? What is the perception prevalent among youth?

How do you see the EU, the USA, or other international actors (such as, for instance, the Council of Europe or the Arab League) in the field of democracy promotion?

- What do you think their role should be as regards change and democratic development in your country of residence?

Where do young people stand on this same issue?

Do you have any additional comment (with reference to youth) regarding EU policies, or the Council of Europe's engagement, in your country?

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