



POLICY DIALOGUE REPORT

Assessing What Meaningful Syrian Youth Inclusion in Peacebuilding Look Like in Practice:

Policy Dialogue Report



Arab
Reform
Initiative

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Despite the adoption in 2015 of the UN's Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda, which recognizes the fundamental role of youth as a positive force in preventing and resolving conflict as well as building sustainable peace, Syrian youth today, after 10 years of conflict, are largely absent from formal political processes and peace negotiations. Yet at the same time, youth are involved in a host of bottom-up peacebuilding efforts and community development activities to provide basic services and humanitarian aid – all of which contribute to micro-level peacebuilding and reconciliation. Yet, the sustainability of their engagement is far from certain, depending at least in part on security issues but also their own livelihood needs, both of which can negatively impact youth participation in grassroots action. Moreover, research has revealed that for many Syrian youth, there is a distinct perception of lost political agency after 10 years of conflict, as well as an understanding of peacebuilding as largely limited to formal negotiation processes only.

All of this has important implications for the implementation of an effective and youth owned YPS agenda in Syria. To put forth meaningful youth inclusion in peacebuilding in Syria, it is necessary to understand what “peace” and “participation” actually mean to them and what they look like in practice. Drawing on the existing actions of youth to counter conflict, build everyday peace, and rebuild coexistence may be one important step in developing a YPS agenda in Syria that is able to respond both to youth ideas regarding peace and security, but also to ensure that actions are imbued with a sense of agency.

On 30 September 2021, the Arab Reform Initiative held a closed policy dialogue, conducted under Chatham House Rule, bringing together Syrian youth peace activists, civil society organizations, policy advisors, and researchers to discuss the opportunities and constraints for youth participation in peacebuilding in Syria. Through the discussion, participants explored how the experience of 10 years of conflict and exclusion have impacted the aspirations, understandings, and perspectives of Syrian youth (here defined as 1828-). Participants also discussed the practical implications for adapting the YPS agenda to the specificities of the Syrian context and took stock of challenges and good practices in peacebuilding activities conducted by youth-led activist groups as well as CSOs offering specific programming for youth. By bringing together practitioners, researchers, and policy advisors, the policy dialogue was able to contribute to collective knowledge on the promotion of youth peacebuilding in Syria in terms of approach, policy, and programming.

Opening Remarks: The Fleeting Sense of Political Agency

Youth have been a fundamental actor promoting profound political change in Syria since 2011. The youth-led social movement that began in 2011 has evolved over the last decade, and while the revolutionary movement itself no longer exists as such, youth activism and engagement did not subside altogether. On the contrary, some youth activists moved into different forms of engagement, such as participation in local councils in Northeast Syria. Yet despite these various forms of political engagement, research shows that Syrian youth feel a loss of political agency and an incapacity to be peacebuilding actors. This stems from both their sense of insufficient expertise and know-how in the field of peacebuilding, but also lack of opportunity for formal participation as a result of the militarization of the conflict and the negotiation process taking place in far-off locations and among select elites.

Moreover, research shows that the protracted nature of the conflict in general as well as several specific dynamics in the Syrian situation create a series of barriers to youth participation. More precisely, the lack of employment and livelihood opportunities for youth that has resulted from the destruction of the Syrian economy has meant that youth seek to prioritize their own daily needs for income generation over other forms of civic or political engagement. Likewise, the lack of physical security and, for young men, the threat of forced conscription act as barriers to various forms of participation in the public sphere.

Nonetheless, research also reveals that Syrian youth identify processes of reconciliation and reconstruction as necessary and, importantly, see a role for themselves therein. Yet at the same, the notion of “peacebuilding” is refuted as a form of political power-making largely detached from grassroots efforts or realities on the ground. Moreover, the tense situation in the country acts as a deterrent as youth are unwilling to take action that could provoke harm either to themselves or to the country’s future. From this research, it is possible to derive that youth do not necessarily see themselves as peacebuilding agents as policymakers may understand, but do see themselves having a possible role in the reconstruction process when both economic and political pressures are lifted off their shoulders.

Panel 1: Assessing Youth Perceptions, Understandings, and Values with Regards to Peace and Peacebuilding

Grassroots Efforts to Promote Syrian Youth Peacebuilding: Practitioner Testimonies

What does the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda mean for Syrian youth in general, and how do those engaged in grassroots peacebuilding actions engage with formal peacebuilding processes? How do youth see themselves as peacebuilding actors, and what are the drivers for youth participation in Syria?

Evidence from youth-led grassroots peacebuilding actions indicates that the factors that encourage and/or undermine youth political participation vary according to the environment, time, location, and political culture that individuals live in and come from. In the Syrian case, after over a decade of conflict and numerous failed efforts at resolution, including cease-fire agreements and international mediation efforts, it is possible to observe certain trends when it comes to youth participation in the country’s peacebuilding processes.

On one hand, young people appear to be indifferent to formal political participation and elite-level peacebuilding processes, primarily because they face a range of more pressing issues related to the lack of employment and education opportunities, and their lack of wellbeing. This has particularly been true since 2015, when the crisis in Syria deteriorated further and millions left the country. To stimulate youth engagement, certain grassroots organizations put forth programming designed to address the reasons for youth detachment from political and peacebuilding engagement. Such programming was designed to build skills, such as debate training and leadership training. Yet perhaps

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more importantly, grassroots efforts to promote youth peacebuilding inclusion also aimed to address how youth understand concepts such as “peace” and “security,” and how these collective understandings can be operationalized in action. Considering the lack of education and infrastructure in the country, many young people have a hard time formulating, let alone implementing, their own ideas related to the achievement of peace and security in practice.

Yet another challenge to youth involvement in grassroots peacebuilding stems itself from the prevailing state of insecurity. Young people who want and decide to engage in political processes must have assurances that it is safe to do so. As such, creating safe spaces becomes the fundamental goal of grassroots organizations who encourage youth political inclusion. Yet, to successfully provide these safe spaces, these organizations need local, national, and international acceptance as well as institutional partnerships.

Even more broadly, youth participating in grassroots peacebuilding perceive of hesitancy on the part of political insiders when it comes to including youth in formal peacebuilding processes. They perceive that youth are still not seen as legitimate actors who can provide and maintain peace in conflict areas. This in the end creates a dead-end for young people where they are not only deprived of employment, education, and safe spaces but also of mentorship and partnerships to produce meaningful inclusion in peacebuilding both at the formal and grassroots levels.

The Multidimensional Concept of Peace

To promote a YPS agenda that is meaningful, understanding youth perceptions towards peace and security is as important as addressing the challenges they face to participation. In presenting different research findings regarding youth political values and understandings, several recurring themes become visible. On one hand, Syrian youth have a multidimensional understanding of peace, comprised of the civilian peace (*al selim al ahli*), which refers to the bottom-up long-term peace that comes from grassroots level, and reconciliation (*al-mosalaha*), which they understand as the efforts between government and oppositions groups mediated by international organizations. Based on this, Syrian youth attribute different qualities to peace in practice. These include safety and security; coexistence, social justice, and equal opportunities; and the existence of a fair government and democratic rule, endowed with tools of accountability to support the oppressed and hold the oppressor accountable.

In the shorter-term, Syrian youth define peace through the existence of stability. Given this, youth-led organizations are trying to provide stability on the ground, hoping that more stability will result in enhanced engagement. Considering the current political realities in Syria, the stability programming these organizations try to implement are rather local and small-scale and aim to meet youth’s needs rather than build an overarching stability.

The tendency to appreciate and participate in small-scale initiatives also comes from youth’s perceived lack of competency to participate in national and international fora. Given this, international actors have an important role to play. Interrupted education and lack of awareness lie at the heart of youth political abstention; international actors, working together with youth-led grassroots organizations, can provide tools to educate ordinary youth in Syria and raise their understanding of the legitimacy of political processes.

Discussion

Based on these research findings, the discussion led participants to identify several needs and challenges in terms of promoting youth participation in peacebuilding activities. First, organizations interested in putting forth programming for youth peacebuilding actions have the responsibility to provide young people, especially those who still live in Syria, with a safe space where their participation is anonymous. Indeed, potential participants to peacebuilding actions seek not only a space that is safe from political actors but also from other youth participants. The crisis in the country has created an environment where trust is largely absent and where youth filter their participation and engagement in the public sphere as much as possible. Given this context, anonymous participation is both necessary but only truly possible on virtual platforms. Yet at the same time, in the Syrian case, online tools that almost certainly guarantee complete anonymity do not result in increased breadth of political participation. On the contrary, especially for people coming from certain regions in Syria, virtual spaces can be discriminatory, as not everyone has access to digital software and hardware tools. As a result, online safe spaces as used in youth peacebuilding programming can create forms of exclusion. Youth-led grassroots organizations are aware of this conundrum but unfortunately do not have other equally safe options. And while most activists are aware that other participation options are available in theory, without a complete guarantee of participants’ safety they are not willing to take the risk.

Another challenge to increasing Syrian youth participation in peacebuilding concerns how well external actors actually

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listen to and integrate the perspectives of youth. Do governments and international organizations sufficiently understand localized sentiments and context-specificity? Is there enough engagement with local actors, and do national and international organizations have the tools to efficiently engage with them? According to Syrian youth-led organizations who work on the ground, governments are interested in the implementation of the YPS agenda only to advance their own inclusion to the dialogue and the conflict in question. While the passage of UNSCR 2250 has led to increased interest to engage with youth in conflict areas, especially Syria, the implementation of the agenda has still not been concretized. From the perspective of youth peace activists, international interest is maintained only up until a certain point, and sponsors of youth grassroots peacebuilding actions lose interest and withdraw support very early in the process, mainly because they view young people as tools to vocalize resentment but not necessarily legitimate agents in peacebuilding. The international narrative is usually dominated by country strategies, not necessarily by the realities faced by youth and their own visions for peace and stability.

Perhaps more broadly, attempting to encapsulate all youth under one umbrella necessarily poses problem, as youth are not a homogenous category. How does meaningful participation look for youth in general, and not just youth activists who are already conducting peacebuilding work either in formal or informal venues? Do the ideas of peace and participation as held by policy makers and external actors differ from those of the average Syrian youth? If so, how can national and international actors bridge the gap and render youth participation more inclusive? To begin to answer these questions and addresses these issues, it should be recognized from the outset that everyone, whether an activist or ordinary citizen, has the right to participate in political processes.

Panel 2: Lessons Learned on the Ground - Implementing the YPS Agenda in Syria

Building bridging mechanism between the everyday peace practices and beliefs of youth and the formal peacebuilding table is not solely about implementing projects. What is also essential is providing spaces for youth engagement in the public sphere more generally. In Syria, where youth remain marginalized and underrepresented across the board, this is

particularly difficult and indeed exacerbated by the country's deep political and social divisions. One strategy that has been identified to overcome these challenges is to support youth engagement in the public sphere through joint advocacy campaigns. By first bringing together local youth together and then moving on to national, and eventually, international stages, a pathway for peace advocacy for and by youth can be forged.

However, such as strategy is difficult to operationalize. In Syria – as everywhere – young people rarely share the same vision of politics due to their different backgrounds, which creates hesitancy and distrust when it comes to political participation on a local level, let alone the national or international levels. Moreover, engaging young people in political processes cannot be approached as a project, but a long-term and time-consuming process. Working with young people requires certain structures and mechanisms that must be built and adapted by civil society and other external actors. In addition, youth programming needs to be sustainable, which can be achieved by rendering youth exchanges more natural and voluntary. Fostering strong relationships and good local strategies is necessary to increase youth influence at national and international levels.

Yet, what happens when youth are able to reach these international levels and are invited to participate at formal peacebuilding tables? Four factors can be identified in the Syrian context that are working against youth participation in peace-making on an international scale. These include the existence of multiple locations of peace-making, which causes fragmentation; the lack of accessibility of existing peace-making efforts as a result of protocols and politicized social practices; the fragmentation of civil society but also the tendency to treat youth as a single community and not recognize the diversity of youth voices; and the changing international timelines and geopolitical considerations in Syria.

Finally, while organic youth peacebuilding does exist, it is solely at local levels in Syria. Ironically, this makes government actors brand youth organizations as local actors only, rendering it difficult for youth to move up the ladder and participate in the bigger picture. This, in turn, creates a considerable disconnect between the existing youth peacebuilding efforts and international policy-making processes. For example, there have been several ceasefire agreements and attempts to terminate hostilities in Syria, but youth have not been brought to the table. On the contrary, since 2011, there is a growing tendency to associate youth participation with voicing resentment and protesting, viewing that influence in decision-making can only be achieved from outside formal processes. This is a faulty and a dangerous

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line of reasoning not only because it excludes an important group from peacebuilding processes but also designates these issues as only pertaining to youth and not to society as a whole.

Discussion

With regards to local youth programming, raising awareness of the key needs and issues facing local communities provides a good entry point into promoting the participation of youth. Yet the biggest challenge is to create sustainable programming, given that most funding is given to short-term projects whereas promoting youth participation in political processes necessitates continued training and evolving action. There is also a need to engage youth in formal local processes, which also takes time. Examples from Northeast Syria, and the transition that local CSOs have gone through, can be a good model for similar initiatives in the future.

With regards to international youth programming, one major challenge is the approach of international actors to grassroots youth organizations, which are regarded with scepticism and provided only very limited funds. There is a persistent issue of trust on multiple levels, which may only be resolved as young people successfully prove their legitimacy and relevancy when it comes to peacebuilding processes.

Yet, changing the nature and implementation of top-down approaches to promoting youth participation in peacebuilding is easier than trying to change a whole generation's perception of youth. It is the tools that allow young people to participate that need to change. For example, there is a need for innovative funding mechanisms that are available to young people whether they are provided by local, national, regional, or international initiatives. These changes are the responsibility of those who have access and privilege, which in most cases are the governments and international organizations and not youth organizations and initiatives themselves. Likewise, given the non-homogenous nature of youth, and the fact that views may not always be aligned with those implementing the YPS agenda in top-down fashion, youth can suffer from practices of gatekeeping by external actors, institutions, and elites.

Yet beyond these obstacles to increasing youth participation, the issue of livelihood needs and the urgency of generating income cannot be underestimated. Research has shown that for the majority of young people in Syria today, unemployment and the search for work are the most important obstacles to their participation. Likewise, poverty prevents young people from engaging in public affairs. Indeed, so important is the link between socioeconomic situation and political participation that some youth in Syria speculate that the government intentionally ensures a state of perpetual financial need as a strategy to drain youth's time, energy, and resources away

hand, there are still governmental gatekeeping mechanisms in place to contain youth, where the YPS label is used as a binding tool to keep youth in check and prevent another episode of mass popular mobilization. On the other hand, the lack of stability and security continues to be a barrier to youth political participation by shifting priorities. In other words, regardless of the degree of their inclusion in formal peacebuilding processes, the priorities of immediate needs are expected to remain the same until the end of hostilities. This signifies that when the conflict terminates, civil society actors and other national and international organizations who offer programming for youth must continue to work towards youth political participation. In other words, efforts to include youth must not end at peace-making but must also be extended to a peace-keeping context. This is especially needed considering that Syrian youth represent a constituency that includes those not currently engaged as well as the diaspora community.

Concluding Remarks

Successful implementation of the YPS agenda in Syria requires collectively understanding individual, local, national, and international components of the equation, and significant work must still be done when it comes to the actual implementation of the agenda. Yet at its core, promoting meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding and politics means engaging in long-term processes to provide youth with the necessary capacities, leadership mechanisms, and financial assistance to convert their values and ideals into effective political action. Youth are a permanent part of society, and any sustainable investment made into youth is as much as an investment in the present as it is in the future.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality,



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