Lost Generation? Youth Mobility, Risk, and Resilience in Protracted Refugee
Situations

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Abstract:
How does access to livelihood relate to issues of stability and security in states
hosting long-term refugee populations? Refugee youth unemployment has been
linked to increased risk of radicalisation and/or exploitation; some argue that lack of
mobility undermines the resilience of youth, contributes to their vulnerability and
increases their susceptibility to extremist ideologies (Power2Youth, 2017). This
paper seeks to analyse refugee youth access to employment, education, and
mobility and critically interrogate the hypothesis that refugee youth unemployment
links directly to radicalisation. We argue that refugee youth unemployment is just
one factor linked to radicalisation. Accordingly, preventing radicalisation requires
multi-layered, nuanced approaches that look beyond neo-liberal economic
interventions and focus instead on countering social marginalisation and political
alienation more broadly.

Introduction
Youth mobility, radicalisation and resilience are increasingly important issues in
understanding the challenges presented by prolonged forced displacement of refugees
in the context of a constantly evolving global security environment. With a focus on
refugees in Lebanon and Tunisía, this paper seeks to assess refugee youth access to
employment, education, and mobility; critically interrogate the hypothesis that youth
unemployment links directly to radicalisation (Maleckova 2005; Alexander 2011); and
provide context-relevant policy recommendations that consider both refugee and host
populations’ needs. Specifically, we ask: 1) What are the challenges to
mobility/employment faced by refugee youth? 2) To what extent does unemployment
and poverty link to radicalisation? 3) How do government policies regarding refugees
reflect these risk assumptions, and what policy changes might better contribute to
increased youth resilience and security?

We argue that the link between refugee youth unemployment and radicalisation
is more complex and nuanced than commonly assumed. In our research, it was not
unemployment itself that led to radicalisation, but the feeling among refugee youth
that state institutions are rigged against them, with no hope for economic growth,
social inclusion, or political empowerment. Feelings of frustration are linked largely
to perceptions of state corruption; when youth lose faith in state institutions, it is
easier for extremism to take root: “Radicalisation does not begin because the
transportation is not free: it begins if people cannot do anything about it.” This is
especially the case when the narrative of unemployed youth refugees as threats are
reflected in security policies and policing practices that further marginalise youth,
sometimes creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that make youth more susceptible,
rather than less susceptible, to radical recruitment. As such, neo-liberal market-
based solutions are not a panacea to radicalization because the core structural inequalities are not tackled (MacDonald, 2011). Preventing extremism and increasing resilience requires a multi-layered, holistic approach, with a two-tiered focus on developing community relationships and improving state institutions.

**Literature Review**

**Youth & Forced Displacement**

In the evolving field of refugee studies in the Middle East, academic literature has side-lined the issue of the protracted nature of forced displacement and its impact on host societies in terms of youth mobility and radicalisation. Whilst there is an established literature on state counterterrorism and radicalisation measures addressing links to socioeconomic indicators of poverty and unemployment (Kavanagh 2011), we have limited knowledge of the policy responses in dealing with the complex problem as it relates to displaced youth (18-24 years old) in host states. The exclusive focus on state actions adopted by most analyses has marginalised the experiences of a group essentialised, increasingly recognized by the donor community and host states as threatening to become a ‘Lost Generation’ (NRC/UNICEF 2014).

Even humanitarian aid agencies and international development agencies have felt compelled to prioritise other groups (such as children) meaning that comprehensive understanding in terms of youth is lost. It is for this reason that we have identified youth as the specific group for study. Despite being one of the most pressing problems of the contemporary Middle East in terms of state resilience and survival, there have been limited academic or policy efforts to understand the needs of protracted displacement of refugee youth in particular; many studies and interventions focus instead on children under 18 years, or on broader demographics. Likewise, while there have been efforts to help school-age children access education, there has been little attention on opportunities for higher education (Dhingra 2016) or vocational training, particularly outside of refugee camp settings (although the majority of the Syrian refugee population in Jordan and Lebanon reside outside of camps).

**Mobility & Radicalisation**

There is an extensive literature around refugees and security/terror threats in and from the Middle East in terms of state perceptions of threat from migrant waves and ‘hosting’ status (Long 2013; Auton & Slobodien 2016; Curtis 2013). This work has developed an understanding of displaced youth within fixed frames and assumptions around their vulnerabilities to radical discourses and actions arising from lack of opportunity for mobility (Bizina & Gray 2014; Shelly 2014; Downey 2014). When headlines hit newspapers at home and abroad about terror cells, lone wolves and violent attacks, the mobilisers are portrayed as vulnerable youth trapped in a generational poverty-terror cycle in host states. Such views are reflected in policy agendas, driving expectations of state responses on these issues. For every terror or security threat attributed to refugee populations they are once again victimized as a result of public prejudice and subjected to unduly restrictive measures, which can further limit or impede access to employment or mobility.
In this paper, we do not look at (un)-employment in isolation, but rather how mobility relates to radicalisation, risk, and resilience. Some refugee agencies and NGOs are beginning to advocate for youth employment and the right to work, warning against the ‘camp’ and its attendant limits on mobility as a long-term solution to protracted displacement, as it is increasingly acknowledged that integrating refugees into host state economies builds skills, reduces economic burdens and establishes security (ILO 2015; Aleinkoff 2015; Aleinkoff & Poellot 2014). In contrast, neglecting youth issues such as mobility is understood to increase vulnerability to radicalisation discourses. Only recently a number of international organizations, including Mercy Corps, have taken steps towards addressing this issue by advocating for ‘labour mobility initiatives’ in host states. However, rigorous empirical research to support such initiatives is still lacking.

Methodology

Our findings to date are based on data from focus groups conducted by the authors in Lebanon and Tunisia for two projects: the EU’s Power2Youth project and Club de Madrid’s media messaging for CVE project. Focus groups included refugees and non-refugees in the formal work sector, in the informal work sector, in vocational training, in higher education, unemployed but seeking work, and non-employed. Focus groups also examine individual and collective responses to radicalisation and recruitment campaigns. Focus group has been analysed to determine the specific opportunities and constraints to youth mobility, comparing experiences between refugees and youth in host communities, between those in Lebanon and those in Tunisia, and between men and women. Additional data has been gathered via interviews with UNHCR and UNDP staff; review of local and national labour policies and developments; and analysis of UNHCR, ILO, and World Bank data.

Findings:

Refugee Youth Employment and Mobility

Opportunities for meaningful employment for youth refugees are indeed limited. In Lebanon for example, according to the ILO, only about half of Syrian refugees are economically active, and only one-third have access to employment, which is overwhelmingly in informal and low-skilled positions. However, the mobility and employment challenges faced by refugee youth mirror the challenges faced by the general MENA population in general, and MENA youth in particular. In Lebanon for example, unemployment has increased to approximately 20 percent, while youth unemployment is estimated at at least 34 percent. Likewise, in Tunisia, overall unemployment has risen to 15.6 percent, while youth unemployment is estimated to

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1 See: https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/partner.php?Orgld=31
2 We expect to conduct additional focus groups in upcoming months in Jordan and Turkey.

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be at least twice that. In both Lebanon and Tunisia, women’s unemployment is estimated to be at least double men’s unemployment. In situations of overall unemployment, groups with less leverage and less social capital (such as youth, refugees, and women) tend to be affected to an even greater degree. An intersectional approach that merges those identities thus indicates that refugee youth face even more mobility challenges than other job-seekers, which women refugee youth facing even more limitations.

A seemingly logical response to this issue is to engage in development programs, as implemented by many IOs and NGOs, that seek to provide skills trainings for refugee youth to increase employability. However, such interventions can be misguided for several reasons. First, interventions that provide trainings in the absence of job training can actually exacerbate the problem by contributing to an already over-skilled population who are perhaps more likely to become frustrated when their newly honed skills do not translate into meaningful employment. Second, interventions that privilege refugee populations without simultaneously working to improve opportunities for local populations can contribute to inter-community tensions and fuel suspicions that refugees are ‘stealing’ jobs. Third, such interventions on their own do not address the structural problems that contribute to the lack of jobs, including corruption and wasta within state institutions (and other sectors), and misguided neoliberal policies of states and IOs that increase gaps between elites and marginalised communities.

Countering Assumptions of Unemployment-Radicalisation Link

Refugee youth unemployment is often cited as link to radicalisation; unemployed refugee youth are seen as easy targets for recruiters because they might be more likely to respond to financial incentives, a sense of purpose or social identity. However, while this perception persists, there is not direct causality between refugee youth unemployment and radicalization, and unemployment is just one of many factors that can lead to radicalization. Indeed, many youth who have joined extremist groups did come from backgrounds where they had unemployment and/or education. (Mercy Corps, 2015)

In our focus groups for example, participants cited unemployment as one aspect potentially correlated with radicalization, but definitely not a determinative attribute. Instead, our participants indicated that refugee youth were most susceptible when there was an interaction of factors, including but not limited to unemployment, that resulted in perceptions of isolation or exclusion, resulting from

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5 http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2016/03/tunisia-youth-unemployment-a-serious-problem-says-un-chief/#.WTQjGxPyyVo
6 Women are often underrepresented in unemployment figures because they have had to drop out of workforce; women are seen as unnecessarily competing with men for scarce jobs; women who want to work are by default often subsumed to traditional roles; lack of jobs for men means many are not marrying until later, so young women are often married to older men.
relative deprivation, social marginalization, or political exclusion. According to our participants, the element of political exclusion is especially overlooked by both states and IOs in efforts to prevent radicalization. Again, political exclusion was not limited to refugees, but included MENA youth and even citizens more broadly, though refugees felt even more political marginalization. Some of the elements of political exclusion most cited by participants included state corruption; ‘youth programs’ that solely privilege of urban, wealthy youth; policing policies that treat most youth and/or refugees as threats; and lack of space for political dissent. These policies contribute to overall disillusionment with state institutions and can push youth to explore other paths of inclusion or validation.

**Conclusions & Policy Recommendations:**

Based on our initial focus group findings, we conclude that unemployment does not link directly to radicalization for refugees or other MENA youth. Preventing violent extremism necessitates rethinking current policies in the following ways:

- Education and job training not enough. Ensuring that youth refugees have access to education is vital for enfranchisement and mobility, however the current market in MENA states does not support the demand for jobs.
- Employment-based interventions should couple job training with Job creation, for both men and women, and for both refugee and non-refugee youth. Jobs need to be made accessible to groups often left out of employment schemes, including rural and non-English speaking communities.
- The answer does not lie in job creation alone.
- External interventions are not enough. States need to challenge systems of washta and corruption, strengthen local and sub-national institutions. The international community can provide support for good governance and incentives for merit-based programs.
- The ‘dangerous refugee youth’ narrative increases marginalization by pre-criminalizing youth in the name of prevention/security. In addition, the common narrative of ‘dangerous refugee youth’ further restricts women’s freedoms. The narrative around youth needs to be re-framed in a way that addresses refugee youth issues in the context of broader youth marginalisation and multiple marginalisations.