

February 2018

www.fmreview.org/syria2018

## Refugee youth, unemployment and extremism: countering the myth

Drew Mikhael and Julie Norman

**Refugee youth unemployment has been linked to increased risk of extremism and/or exploitation. Research indicates, however, that unemployment is just one of many factors triggering frustration among young refugees.**

Refugee youth unemployment is often cited as being linked to extremism; unemployed refugee youth are seen as easily targeted by recruiters because they may be more likely to respond to the attraction of financial incentives, a sense of purpose or social identity. However, our research indicates that there is no direct causality between refugee youth unemployment and extremism, and that unemployment is just one of many factors that can lead to extremism.<sup>1</sup>

Opportunities for meaningful employment for young refugees are certainly limited. In Lebanon, for example, 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.<sup>2</sup> However, the mobility and employment challenges faced by refugee youth mirror the challenges faced by the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) population in general, and MENA youth in particular. In Lebanon, for example, unemployment has increased to approximately 20%, while youth unemployment is estimated at 34%, with similar numbers in Jordan.<sup>3</sup> And in both countries female 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 refugee youth) tend to be affected to an even greater degree.

In our focus groups, however, participants felt that refugee youth were most susceptible when a number of factors – including but not limited to unemployment – interacted, giving rise to a sense of isolation or exclusion, such as that resulting from relative deprivation, social marginalisation or political exclusion.

According to our participants, the element of political exclusion in particular tends to be overlooked by both states and international organisations in efforts to prevent extremism. Again, political exclusion is not limited to refugees but includes MENA youth and even citizens more broadly, though refugees felt greater political marginalisation. Elements of political exclusion most cited by participants included: state corruption; youth programmes that solely privilege the urban and wealthy; 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.

### Responses and recommendations

A seemingly logical response to this issue is to engage in development programmes to provide skills trainings for refugee youth to increase their employability. However, such interventions can be misguided for several reasons. Firstly, interventions that provide training in the absence of jobs can actually exacerbate the problem by contributing to an already over-skilled population who may be more likely to become frustrated when their newly acquired skills do not translate into meaningful employment. Secondly, 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. Thirdly, such interventions on their own do not address the structural problems that contribute to the lack of jobs, including corruption and *wasta* (patronage) within state institutions and other sectors.

Just as there are many drivers of youth susceptibility to extremism, there are many interventions being undertaken at the community level to address those issues more effectively. Some organisations and leaders set out to challenge violent extremism directly by working mainly with ex-combatant and at-risk youth on peace-building and conflict-resolution initiatives but most address extremism less directly by providing alternatives for youth empowerment and engagement.

Interventions that have yielded positive results include psychosocial interventions and the promotion of hope, and creating opportunities for socio-economic development and civic engagement. Local community leaders, including teachers, social workers and community workers, played a key role in all successful interventions we observed, and personal relationships – establishing a bond with the refugee community – were crucial for preventing the recruitment of at-risk youth being targeted by extremists.

Based on our findings, we conclude that unemployment does not link directly to extremism among refugees or other MENA youth, and that preventing violent extremism necessitates rethinking current policies in the following ways:

### **Education and job training are not enough.**

Ensuring that refugee youth have access to education is vital for enfranchisement and mobility; however, demand for jobs currently outstrips supply in MENA states.

**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.

**External interventions are insufficient.** States need to challenge systems of *wasta* to strengthen local and sub-national institutions to increase the trust of citizenry. The international community can provide

support for local government programmes by instituting strong transparency mechanisms.

**There needs to be more support for local NGOs and social workers** who provide alternative opportunities for refugee youth development via leadership programmes, arts interventions, sports programmes and civic engagement that counter radical recruitment efforts and exploitation.

The ‘dangerous refugee youth’ narrative pre-criminalises youth in the name of security, increasing marginalisation and encouraging extremism; furthermore, it limits women’s freedoms as their movements may be restricted due to safety concerns. The narrative around youth should be re-framed to address refugee youth issues in the context of the broader social and political challenges facing all youth in MENA states, while seeking to identify opportunities for youth empowerment and leadership in their local and national contexts.

**Drew Mikhael**

[drewmikhael@gmail.com](mailto:drewmikhael@gmail.com) @DrewMikhael31

**Julie Norman**

[j.norman@qub.ac.uk](mailto:j.norman@qub.ac.uk) @DrJulieNorman2

Research Fellows, Senator George J Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, Queen’s University Belfast  
[www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute](http://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute)

1. Findings based on data from focus groups conducted in Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan for the EU’s Power2Youth project ([www.power2youth.eu](http://www.power2youth.eu)), Club de Madrid’s media messaging for CVE project (<http://bit.ly/ClubMadrid-preventing-extremism>) and ActionAid’s Youth Perspectives on Community Cohesiveness, plus additional research.
2. International Labour Organization <http://bit.ly/ILO-Lebanon>
3. <http://bit.ly/WorldBank-Lebanon-20130411>

### **Options for accessing FMR**

- Read each issue online, in html or pdf format: [www.fmreview.org](http://www.fmreview.org)
- Visit <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series> (search for ‘forced migration review’) to listen to FMR podcasts
- Request a print copy of the full magazine or its accompanying digest: [www.fmreview.org/request/print](http://www.fmreview.org/request/print)

Alternatively, follow us on Twitter or Facebook or sign up for email alerts at [www.fmreview.org/request/alerts](http://www.fmreview.org/request/alerts).