

The In-securitisation of Youth in the South and East Mediterranean

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Abstract

The securitisation of youth as a social category has been well-documented. For the South and East Mediterranean (SEM) countries, moral panics over demographic youth bulges, Islamist radicalisation and protracted conflicts have placed youth centre-stage as a threat to the security of states and societies. Rejecting such assertions as themselves being what Foucault might have termed ‘technologies of power’ in a neoliberal order, and instead taking a critical approach to security, the spotlight is turned towards youth themselves as the referent object of study. This reveals the multidimensional hyper-precarity and insecuritisation of young peoples’ lives which derive from that same neoliberal economic order and the political structures that sustain it in the SEM countries. The finding resonates with other studies of new, insecure, formats for adulthood in Africa and suggests that we should look at the insecurity of young people today to understand global neoliberal futures in countries beyond the post-industrial ‘core’.

We do not use the form “This article does this or that ...”. But please go ahead and improve what I did.

Keywords: four or five please ???

Assertions of the securitisation of youth¹ as a social category, and consequently of youth policy, are now well established. Nowhere is this more true than in studies of, and policy towards, young people in the South and East Mediterranean (SEM) countries. Drawing on an historical dualism in referring to youth which positions *youth as hope of the nation* against *youth as threat to social order*, contemporary securitisation focuses on the problems associated with a demographic bulge at a time of low economic growth, political protest and upheavals, protracted conflict, unregistered migration and Islamic radicalisation. Stanley Cohen remarked that “[s]ocieties appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of

¹ Arguments over appropriate definitions of youth are well-rehearsed and not especially helpful here (besides which, they could amount to a article in themselves). For the purposes of POWER2YOUTH, the limitations and inadequacies of biological boundaries for the category were recognised and a flexible and inclusive approach taken for the qualitative fieldwork. The survey component took youth as between the ages of 18 and 29 in order to exclude school-aged young people but include those accounted for in most INGO accounts.

moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons, emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests”² and so it seems that Arab youth are taking centre-stage in a new depiction of ‘youth as threat’.

Critiques of this approach point to the hegemonic neoliberal context of political structures and policies, both within the region and in its interactions with the wider world. From this perspective, the securitisation of youth (that is, the creation of knowledge about youth which frames them as a threat to security) serves to subordinate young people, to control and govern them, and has little to say about the lives, experiences or aspirations of youth themselves.

This article takes a critical approach to security, arguing that adjusting the referent object away from social order in the neoliberal context of SEM states and towards the life experiences and perspectives of young people can give us a far better understanding of what constitutes security and for whom, making visible the array of (something missing here ???). Instead of reproducing frameworks of knowledge about youth which draw on moral panic to subordinate young people to the security of the existing structures of power, it uncovers knowledge about how those structures impinge on young peoples’ own experiences of security, or the lack thereof.

Drawing principally on the findings of the European Commission-funded POWER2YOUTH project,³ it argues that the lives of SEM youth are characterised by profound and multi-dimensional *insecurity*, although this is experienced differentially according to the specificities of inter-sectional identities.⁴ This insecurity is multi-dimensional (economic, political, social, physical – even at times existential – and ontological), and results from the hyper-precarity of life on the front-line of neoliberal labour-force transformations in countries beyond the post-industrial core. Unlike post-industrial countries in Europe or North America, the SEM economies are not structured around the production and export of knowledge-based goods and services but rather around agriculture, manufacturing, trade in goods and relatively high levels of public employment and consumption. Decades of étatist development, followed by half-hearted liberal economic reforms, have left them with low levels of economic growth, weak international competitiveness, and all but stagnant labour markets, just as the demographic bulge has created dramatically heightened demand for jobs. Expectations around the school-to-work transition are frustrated by an insufficiency of jobs, heightened competition for what jobs *are* available, and the absence of alternative state-provided forms of material support. The difficulties for SEM youth are compounded by the undemocratic, even authoritarian, political structures which govern them and which deny them the political, civil and human rights enjoyed by their counterparts in post-industrial countries. Increasingly reliant for extended periods on families and close social networks which privilege seniority and conservative social cultures, many young people are being

² Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 9.

³ The author wishes to acknowledge all the work done, and the spirit of collegiality and collective discovery in which it was undertaken, by the very many researchers engaged in the POWER2YOUTH project.

⁴ Although this crucial dimension of the findings of POWER2YOUTH is not explored further in this article, the reader should bear in mind throughout the following discussions that, while youth has been somewhat and instrumentally homogenised here, the social category is inclusive of a wide range of diversities which suggest that the insecurities being described are experienced equally differentially.

pushed into a condition similar to what Alcinda Honwana has claimed is a new format for adulthood in Africa – an indefinitely extended transition or *waithood* – amounting to a perpetual state of life-stage insecurity. This finding draws attention to the possibility that the future of the neoliberal global order is one in which there will be differentiated formats for adulthood according to the status and condition of local labour markets and the political structures which maintain them.

The securitisation of youth

The securitisation⁵ of youth has its roots in a well established binary construction of youth as either *the hope of the nation and an engine for development* or, alternatively, *unstable, deviant, potentially degenerate, revolutionary and a threat to the security of the state and society as a whole*.⁶ In the South and East Mediterranean (SEM) countries, as in many post-colonial contexts, youth have carried an historic role in mobilising behind independence struggles, nationalist movements and early nation-building efforts.⁷ Their revolutionary and renovatory potential was initially revered in national myth although subsequently contained through corporatist and authoritarian institutional structures. However, high growth rates in the years of populist-welfarism resulted in a demographic bulge which made its mark felt in the 1990s. As the number and proportion of young people grew but economies stagnated and distributive states retrenched, the gap between the developmental costs of young people and the developmental return⁸ grew and youth were increasingly framed as ‘a problem’. The social imaginaries and policy frames around young people were recast such that they collectively became “a political and security threat, a social and economic burden”.⁹ This janus-faced narrative has become embedded in development discourses at both national, and international, levels of policymaking. For example, the 2016 Arab Human Development Report, a flagship regional annual report of the UNDP, said in recognising that two-thirds of the Arab region’s population is below the age of thirty:

This unprecedented demographic mass of young people at the prime of their working and productive abilities constitutes a huge potential for advancing economic and social development if given the opportunity... . However, young people’s awareness of their capabilities and rights collides with a reality that marginalises them and blocks their pathways to express their opinions, actively participate or earn a living. As a result, instead of being a massive potential for building the future, youth can become an overwhelming power for destruction... .

⁵ Nyman, “Securitization theory”.

⁶ Cooper, “Re-thinking the ‘Problem of Youth’”; Hall, *Adolescence*; Merton, “Social Structure and Anomie”; Sukarieh and Tannock, “The global securitisation of youth”.

⁷ Bennani-Chraïbi and Farag, “Constitution de la jeunesse”, 13.

⁸ The developmental costs of human resources include public and private investments in education, childhood health, family income support, etc., while the developmental returns refer to the individuals’ contributions to society through employment, taxation, and their private carrying of the costs of social reproduction.

⁹ Catuse and Destremau, 2016: 23; this reference is missing at the end ???

If the voices and potential of youth in Arab countries remain ignored, and formal or partial initiatives with no tangible impact on people's lives continue to be implemented, youth will grow ever more alienated, prompting them to lose their capacity to act as constructive forces serving development. Rather, they will become a potent source of protracted social instability threatening human security... This would in turn threaten the entire development process.¹⁰

This troubling depiction is not unique to the SEM countries. Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock have eloquently explained how the combination of moral panic surrounding the revived youth bulge theory, the effort to counter radical Islamist 'terrorism', and the instabilities and conflicts that comprised the Arab Spring and its aftermath, have all fed into a global securitisation of youth as a sub-text of development.¹¹ This has been evident in a raft of institutional initiatives, including the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 of December 2015 on *Youth Peace and Security*, which Sukarieh and Tannock locate within a trajectory of youth security initiatives including "the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in February 2015; the European Youth Against Violent Extremism conference in June 2015; the Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security in August 2015; the Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism in September 2015; and the Arab Human Development Report 2016" (page number ???), the latter focusing exclusively on the role of youth in the Arab countries. "All of these are closely networked and mutually referential" (1).¹² Such initiatives might be commended for their acknowledgement that young people are often the first to suffer from, or may be the most vulnerable to, conflict and insecurity, and also for their emphasis on empowering youth at the local, national and global levels, as "agents of positive change and peace".¹³ But they are also deeply problematic for their assertions that young people themselves are disproportionately at the root of the problem, and for ultimately ignoring the structural determinants of conflict (including the configurations of power within and between those elite institutions themselves and the governmental projects which comprise them).

Lyndsay McLean Hilker has also challenged some of the underlying assumptions behind the securitisation of youth and the binary positioning of youth as both victims and perpetrators of violence. She argues that demographic bulges matter most in terms of security impact when they interact with *other* factors such as prolonged periods of economic stagnation, poor governance, low access to education, absence of rule of law, political exclusion or inter-ethnic inequalities. Even in times of conflict the majority of youths do not participate in violence, yet we know little about why they may choose to negotiate around or resist

¹⁰ UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, 5-15.

¹¹ Sukarieh and Tannock, "In the best interests of youth?"

¹² The list is not exclusive: one can similarly point to OSCE Ministerial declarations in 2014 and 2014 which "promote youth participation in areas like preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, education, tolerance and non-discrimination and political participation" (OSCE, *Youth*, the World Vision Youth, the Peace and Security Consultation in Europe and the December 2017 EU-Africa Summit on Youth, Security and Investment).

¹³ Williams, "Youth, Peace and Security", 1.

violence. Instead, research and policy have been overly focused on the minority who do engage in violence. She suggests we might learn more by moving beyond simplistic monocausal (as in material incentives or accumulated grievances) explanations of how and why young people might become threats to security and stability).¹⁴

A critical approach to studying youth and security challenges is to go still further since it would assume that “security threats and insecurities are not simply objects to be studied, but the product of social and political practices”.¹⁵ Knowledge about security, and by implication what might pose a threat to it, is not benign or neutral, but rather a product of a hegemonic order which establishes what constitutes security, whose security matters and how it should properly be promoted, protected and preserved. From this perspective, security and security-related policy, practice and discourse serve as Foucauldian technologies of power¹⁶ for protecting and reproducing that order. Sukareh and Tannock, among others, have located the securitisation of youth within a hegemonic global neo-liberal project, advanced through international institutions and the national governments with which they partner.¹⁷ The security of neoliberal capital, its agents (governments, economic élites, international financial institutions, etc) and its structures (the nation-state, national institutions, etc) become the answer to the ‘security for whom’ question. The researcher can avoid becoming the unwitting agent of this ‘technology’ of power by altering the referent object of study *away* from what prevailing discourses constitute as security, towards young people themselves. Understanding the *experience of being* young, referent to the social other, and in all its multiple dimensions, can enlighten us about the distributions of power (including exclusions therefrom) and the ‘technologies’ which impel, promote, govern and sustain violence and insecurity, making visible the determining impact of the hegemonic neoliberal order itself on security as it is experienced in the world inhabited by young people.

POWER2YOUTH: The Multi-dimensional Insecurities of SEM Youth

This multi-dimensionality of experience – inclusive of economic, political, social and cultural factors shaping young peoples’ lives in the South and East Mediterranean (SEM) – was central to the EU-funded POWER2 YOUTH. The project, which involved 14 institutional partners from Europe and SEM countries, offered what it described as:

a comprehensive multi-level, interdisciplinary and gender-sensitive approach to understanding youth in the South and East Mediterranean (SEM) region through a cross-national comparative design. The project did this by combining nation-wide surveys, interviews and in-depth analyses of the socio-economic, political and

¹⁴ McLean Hilker, “Violence, Peace and Stability, 2.

¹⁵ Coleman and Rosenow, “Security (studies) and the limits of critique”, 202.

¹⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

¹⁷ Sukarieh and Tannock, *Youth Rising?*; Bessant and Watts, “Cruel Optimism”; Murphy, “Problematizing Arab Youth”.

cultural situations of youth on three levels: the macro (policy/institutional), the meso (organisational) and the micro (individual) level.¹⁸

The objectives of the project were not specifically or objectively related to investigations of security – either the security of young people, or young people’s relevance to the security of others. Rather the project, like its sister EU-funded FP7 project, SAHWA,¹⁹ was an investigation of sources of youth exclusion, pathways to inclusion and prospects for youth-led change in the countries around the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean. The sum total of results from the numerous and extensive data sets, quantitative and qualitative, and from the range of analyses produced by the wider project team were summarised in a policy-oriented report which initially set out the nature of the multiple marginalisations experienced by youth, emphasising that these are experienced differentially depending on each individual’s intersected identities. Moreover, they were frequently not specific to youth but rather were by-products of structural economic and political deficits experienced by wider populations, albeit with youth being relatively more vulnerable to them due to latecomer status and lack of access to existing networks or institutions of power.²⁰ The list did not vary a great deal from one that might be compiled by young people in many other places around the world which exhibit high rates of youth unemployment, low rates of formal political participation and a general disconnect between national narratives and the normative and sub-cultural frameworks of young people. Indeed the data collected from six countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Palestine, Turkey and Lebanon) provoked conversations which were well rehearsed in youth and youth policy studies: poor school-to-work transitions, higher than average unemployment, a failure to translate more education into better employment prospects, increased material dependence on family and solidarity networks as the state retrenches, new formats for – and spaces of – socialisation which challenge normative and ontological expectations, and increased alienation from political systems which are unresponsive to concerns about poverty, austerity, social justice, corruption and social exclusion.

What was striking, however, was the extent to which the defining characteristic of young people’s everyday lives in SEM countries appeared to be *insecurity*. This finding was tested

¹⁸ *POWER2YOUTH: A Comprehensive Approach to the Understanding of Youth Exclusion and the Prospects for Youth-led Change in the South and East Mediterranean*. This project received Euro 2.5 million funding from the European Union’s Seventh Framework programme for research, development and demonstration under grant agreement no. 612782. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from a range of sources, including public statistics, public documents and academic studies, focus groups and interviews with relevant stakeholder and key informants (including young people and youth-based CSOs) and large-n nation-wide surveys of 7,573 young people aged between 15 and 29. www.power2youth.eu. For survey results specifically, see Titnes *et al.*, *Young People in South East Mediterranean*.

¹⁹ *SAHWA Researching Arab Mediterranean Youth: Towards a New Social Contract*, Project Number 613174, included 15 member institutions and was led by CIDOB in Barcelona.

²⁰ Calder *et al.*, *Marginalization, Young People in the South*.

against an additional ten focus groups conducted by the policy report team during the period November-December 2016.²¹ Together with the original project data sets and findings, the focus groups found that insecurity pervades all dimensions of a young person's life – economic, political, social, physical (even existential) and ontological. It is particularly pronounced for young women, although again every individual's experience is different and reflects the composition of their intersected identities. In degree and multi-dimensionality it is frequently sufficient such that apparently life-threatening mass migration or recruitment into radical political groups become normalised options. This article relies extensively on the voices of the participants in those focus groups, as well as the statistical data derived from the larger POWER2YOUTH survey, to demonstrate the insecurity of SEM young people's lived experiences.

Degrees of precarious living

Both POWER2YOUTH and SAHWA paid particular attention to the economic and, specifically, the employment challenges represented by the region's demographic bulge. Youth-related public discourse and policy, at both national and international levels, places employment centre-stage, not least because frustrations over the lack of jobs played a visible role in the Arab Spring protests of 2010-11. More significantly for the argument being made here, transformations in the global labour market lie at the heart of the neoliberal project.

As aspirations to full employment have been abandoned, along with étatist commitments to job creation, youth globally have been reframed as a surplus supply – or reserve army – of labour. Policy discourses revolve around the school-to-work transition and providing the opportunities for young people to acquire the skills and capacities which will make them competitive against their peers. The focus of policy rests on education and training understood as social investments for a longer-term economic return.²² The notion that young people – if properly nurtured – can become independent contributors to society endorses the neo-liberal focus on the individual taking responsibility for their own welfare. However, as Filip Coussée *et al.* explain, this is anything but an emancipatory approach to youth. They argue that, far from being a “positive and preventative paradigm”, it reaffirms a view of vulnerable youth as somehow being themselves deficient.²³ After all, if youth do not ‘develop’ the way that institutions and hegemonic ideological expectations dictate is best for society, then something is wrong with *them*. This approach is therefore regulatory since young people are both responsible for their own employability yet must develop according to

²¹ A total of 73 young people were included in this last round of focus groups, including 2 in Nablus (November 2016), 5 in Tunis (November 2016) and 3 in Beirut (December 2016). Each group included 3-11 individuals, including male (34) and female (39) participants from both urban and rural localities. The author would like to thank the British Council and Cathaginia (Carthagina ???) in Tunisia, and ALHR in Lebanon, for their assistance in arranging the focus groups. A standardised template was utilised across all focus groups, although moderators were allowed some discretion in enabling participants to address local specificities. The focus groups were moderated directly by members of the work package team, aided in some instances by local translators, and were conducted in Arabic/English as respondents felt comfortable. An effort was made to avoid duplicating respondents from the larger POWER2YOUTH data collection.

²² Wyn and White, *Rethinking Youth*, 7.

²³ Coussée *et al.*, “Empowering the Powerful”, 425.

the needs of the labour market. It amounts, as James Côté suggests, to the proletarianisation of youth.²⁴

Despite this approach being firmly embedded in the youth, education and employment policies of the primary institutions of global liberal capital, such as the World Bank, the United Nations, the OECD, the ILO and the IMF, they have proved far from successful in creating a match between labour supply and demand, especially when it comes to young people. By 2004, the International Labour Organisation was talking about a youth employment crisis as youth (defined as between the ages of 15 and 24) comprised 41.5 percent of the total global unemployed. Since then, although rates of youth unemployment in developed economies have improved somewhat, they have worsened in the Asian regions, the Middle East and Africa (which include the SEM countries). Over all the global youth share of unemployment sat at 36.7 percent in 2014 and the youth unemployment rate remained at a global average of 13 percent.²⁵ Of all regions, the MENA fared worst, with 28.2 percent of young people in the Middle East and 30.5 percent in North Africa being reported as unemployed. These broad statistics, of course, disguise regional and gender variations which, for example, witness over 40 percent of rural Tunisian youth out of work and double the number of female as male youth unemployed.

Unsurprisingly, POWER2YOUTH confirmed this picture of insufficient job opportunities and subsequent unemployment, or under-employment, among SEM youth. Of over 7000 young people surveyed in six countries,²⁶ between just 28 percent (Palestine) and 51 percent (Morocco) considered themselves to be working. Between 7 percent (that's very low !) (Lebanon) and 29 percent (Tunisia) described themselves as unemployed or discouraged, the rest being 'out of the labour force'. Between 30 percent (Palestine) and 62 percent (Lebanon) described themselves as students which might suggest they were still building the skills and competencies needed by employers. However, for a large proportion of SEM youth, further education (and subsequent qualification inflation) has failed to translate into employment opportunities. Between 19 percent (Turkey) and 38 percent (Tunisia) of respondents had post-secondary education, but only 2 percent (Egypt) to 18 percent (Turkey) of those employed had translated this into 'professional' or 'managerial' employment.

Even when they were employed, young people's work experience was fraught with insecurity. In the POWER2YOUTH survey only between 17 percent (Palestine) and 40 percent (Lebanon) of those employed had a formal contract for their employment, and between 53 percent (Morocco and Lebanon) and 72 percent (Egypt) were 'very' or 'somewhat' afraid of losing their jobs. Although Turkey (at 74 percent) was an outlier, between only 13 percent (Egypt) and 38 percent (Lebanon) had access to health insurance through their employer, and between 36 percent (Lebanon) and 75 percent (Egypt) had no employer-provided benefits at all (again, Turkey was the exception at just 14 percent). Between 25 percent (Turkey) and 72 percent (Egypt) of those employed described their work

²⁴ Côté, "Towards a new political economy".

²⁵ ILO, *Global Employment Trends for Youth*, 1-2.

²⁶ For the purposes of the survey, and to address reservations regarding the appropriateness of biologically determined definitions of youth, youth was defined as being between the ages of 18 and 29 years. The countries were Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt. (Tiltne and Pedersen, 2017) is this Tiltne *et al.* ??? if it's not, the reference is missing at the end ???

as temporary, seasonal or irregular. Only between 2 percent (Egypt) and 6 percent (Lebanon and Tunisia) held salaried (and considered as secure) public sector jobs. Between 24 percent (Lebanon) and 55 percent (Egypt) of young people claimed they worked in dangerous conditions and between 24 percent (Lebanon) and 63 percent (Egypt) said they sometimes, hardly ever or never worked in healthy conditions.²⁷ When it came to defending their labour interests, youth found little support. Between just 5 percent (Egypt) and 27 percent (Turkey) evidenced “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of trust in labour unions and only 3 percent or fewer thought labour unions were the best arena for enabling young people to have influence over their own interests.

Employment for SEM young people is characterised then by increasing precarity, a concept indicating capital’s preference for *insecure* labour, that is, labour which does not enjoy the seven forms of labour security (labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security, and representation security).²⁸ (is it all right if I move the footnote to here ??? If not, the statement that these conditions are capital’s preference requires substantiation ???) As latecomers to the market and lacking institutional power and capacity to resist, SEM youth appear to be on the front-line of labour precarity and the buffer zone for the transformation of national (and by extension, in an era of economic liberalisation, global) labour markets.

But the data demonstrates something more. As youth unemployment and under-employment in formal labour markets have expanded, SEM young people have made their way, when they can, into employment in the informal economy which has expanded just as rapidly in the post-étatist era in many middle-income and less developed regions. A 2010 review of informal labour markets by the World Bank found that informal economies in the broader MENA region typically produce around 27 percent of GDP and employ around 67 percent of the labour force.²⁹

Regional differentiation (and indeed spatial differentiation within regions and individual countries) is an important dimension of precarity. For Standing, precarity refers to the formal labour economy and post-industrial modes of production. Yet,

[i]n most low-income countries, at least three in four young workers fall within the category of irregular employment, engaged in either own-account work, contributing family work, casual paid employment or temporary (non-casual) labour. Nine in ten young workers remain in informal employment. This compares to an only slightly improved share of two in three youth in the middle-income countries.³⁰

²⁷ Tiltneš *et al.*, *Young People in South East Mediterranean*.

²⁸ Standing, *The Precariat*.

²⁹ reference required ???

³⁰ ILO, *Global Employment Trends for Youth*, 2.

Informal economies offer small-scale, short-term and low capitalisation opportunities for income generation, enabling young people to “get by”,³¹ to fill gaps between formal employment or education opportunities, and to manage small material spaces for themselves. However, they are by definition hyper-precarious, offering no social or legal protection and often including physical insecurity. They frequently traverse the boundaries of legality and illegality, marginality and criminality, reinforcing the logic of narratives which place young people on the perpetual cusp of deviancy. Moreover, the informal sector often acts as a recruitment vehicle for networks with violent inclinations, specifically militant Islamist networks. As one young Lebanese focus group respondent said:

There’s no point pushing education for some of the rural youth because they cannot access a university, cannot afford it and get an education. The only people offering rural youth anything are the recruiters (Islamic State) who offer them a future.³²

This recruitment is not necessarily for purposes of jihad, but also enables the financially-motivated smuggling of goods, people and weapons across borders. This is an important means by which young people alleviate formal unemployment, poverty and exclusion, but at the same time it brings new insecurities. A study of the Kasserine region of Tunisia, for example, found that “The counter-terrorism agenda has now led to a situation where subsistence smuggling is conflated with criminality and the demands from young people in the region for social justice and inclusion are delegitimised.”³³

An alternative option for navigating the employment gap lies in the smuggling of young people across the Mediterranean into Europe, often by other young people and with tremendous danger attached. (An alternative option for navigating the employment gap lies in leaving one’s country or even crossing the Mediterranean into Europe, with tremendous danger attached. ???) A desire to take such risks and migrate, indicates a less than secure attachment to existing living conditions. Amongst survey respondents, young Tunisians showed the greatest desire to leave their country: although 94 percent of those surveyed by POWER2YOUTH had never travelled abroad before, 35 percent said it was very or somewhat likely they would travel to another Middle Eastern country in the next five years, and 45 percent said they were likely to travel to Europe. Moroccan youths were less likely to travel to the wider Middle East (23 percent), but 34 percent expressed an interest in Europe. Conversely, Palestinian youth were more likely to travel to the Middle East in search of a better living (37 percent) than to Europe (25 percent). Jobs featured high in reasons for migrating: “I love my country and I don’t want to move to another country... . But when we graduate from university we can’t find jobs. In other countries I think jobs are available.” Other motivations included a frustration with “the inefficiencies of everything” and a yearning for greater personal freedom. A young male in Nablus said,

I want to have a life in Europe, it is an open life, like you do whatever you want and nobody will say that’s wrong and that’s right. Nobody can change your mind, nobody

³¹ Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 57-9.

³² Focus Group Beirut, December 2016.

³³ Meddeb, *Smuggling in the Kasserine Region*, 4.

can affect your opinion. Because here if you want to say something, maybe you will face a lot of problems.³⁴

As young people, and especially young men, consider their (limited) options, they are increasingly caught in a position of what Langevang has termed “wait and see”,³⁵ hanging round in places where they might be offered temporary bouts of work. Visible crowds of young men, loitering and apparently purposeless, fill street corners, public squares and street cafés, contributing to public perceptions of deviancy, idleness and threat, even as they indicate the reality of youth’s own insecurity.

A final dimension of the insecurity of SEM youth employment is the overarching importance of characteristics *other than qualification* in accessing employment opportunities in SEM countries. These not only contradict the mythology of the school-to-work transition, but add additional unpredictability and uncertainty to the labour market. Numerous reports have documented the importance of political party affiliation, for example, in accessing both employment opportunities and those associated with training and active labour market programmes formulated under the youth policy rubric and endorsed by international partners.³⁶ However, it is arguably *wasta*, or having personal connections, which plays the greater role in securing and maintaining a job. Over 90 percent of all survey respondents in every country believed that *wasta* was either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ important in accessing employment, and certainly far more important than qualifications or merit.³⁷ As one focus group participant put it: “There’s not a lot of opportunities. We can work hard and get good grades but someone who lacks competence will get the job because of *wasta*”. Another young woman in Nablus said:

I feel pessimistic about jobs. I graduated. Everyone needs an intermediary, for every opportunity, for work, you need *wasta* in these times. No *wasta*, no work. Even for training, you are supposed to get experience, but the training doesn’t help you get a job, only *wasta*.³⁸

Compounding precarity in the world of work is the insufficiency or absence of alternative sources of material security for young people. The withdrawal and targeting of subsidies, adjustments to social insurance and pensions regimes, widening income inequality, growing domestic debt, and the lack of affordable housing make it ever more difficult to achieve material security and consequently enter the significant social markets of adulthood such as marriage, leaving home, or starting a family. The POWER2YOUTH survey found that youth access to formal forms of support was limited. For example, between 47 percent (Lebanon) and 81 percent (Egypt) of young Arabs had no access to health insurance (although Turkish youth did relatively well with only 9 percent having no access at all). Between just 16 percent

³⁴ Focus Group Nablus, November 2016; Focus Group Beirut, December 2016 and Focus Group Nablus, November 2016. respectively.

³⁵ Langevang, “Are we managing?”

³⁶ Murphy, “A Political Economy of Youth”; Floris, *Tunisia: Studies on Youth Policies*.

³⁷ Calder *et al*, *Marginalization, Young People in the South*, 19.

³⁸ Focus Group Beirut, December 2016 and Focus Group Nablus, November 2016, respectively.

(Egypt) and 58 percent (Morocco) of employed workers had access to paid sick leave and a maximum of 36 percent (Turkey) were entitled to monthly stipend pension payments. The lack of financial security featured high in young people's concerns, especially as they considered possibilities for independent living.

As one focus group respondent said, "Even if you wanted to be independent you can't because rent costs too much and the housing is all for families". Another said, "There is no point planning for a mortgage or making any long term plans because you never know what's coming". Another suggested, "I might not be able to carry on with my studies if my father gets sicker"; another young woman said, "I am most anxious about what might happen if I lose my job and what will happen to my family", and another, "We think about our futures all the time. We cannot waste time by having fun. For everything we do there is an opportunity cost".³⁹

The social and political correlates of precarity in SEM countries

The social implications, or accompanying costs, of this material insecurity are extensive. Foremost is the continued dependence on family networks for material support, despite achieving the physical, psychological and emotional maturity which supports personal autonomy. Between 53 percent (Tunisia) and 75 percent (Palestine) of survey respondents cited family and parents as accounting for their place of residence. Yet between only 29 percent (Tunisia) and 50 percent (Lebanon) felt that their opinions were taken seriously by adult members of their family. They were most likely to discuss intimate aspects of their personal lives such as romantic relationships, friendship issues, being teased or bullied, sexual harassment, or gender issues with their friends, but were more likely to discuss issues relating to their material futures (such as education, migration, and employment) with their families. A dissonance thus arises between their social external persona (in which they display personal autonomy) and their 'family' persona where they remain in a dependent child-like status. This is intensified by regimes mobilising socio-cultural norms which reproduce the dependence of young people on the patriarchal hierarchy of the family. Investigations of recent adjustments in family and personal status laws by POWER2YOUTH showed clearly that state policies in all countries are reinforcing the subordination of women, the supervisory powers of parents, and the normative power of conservative social culture.⁴⁰

This dissonance reverberates in the clash between public officially-sanctioned messaging about and for youth (such as youth-oriented TV and radio stations) and more rebellious or resistant sub-cultures produced and reproduced through social media and popular culture.⁴¹ Young people perform their differing and insecure social identities – at times those of autonomous adulthood, at other times those of dependent youth, navigating between them as they move through the different social realms of their lives.

In their political lives too, young people are forced to live with a profound and grating dissonance between the populist, nationalist, participatory and often democratic discourses of regimes, performed through hollow institutions and carefully constructed policy frameworks on the one hand, and the reality of exclusivist, neo-patrimonial, often authoritarian and even

³⁹ All quotes from Focus Group Beirut, December 2016.

⁴⁰ Yurttagüleer, *The Impact of Youth Policies*; De Bel-Air, *Youth and Family Policies*.

⁴¹ Murphy, "Problematizing Arab Youth", 12.

gerontocratic political realities. Public discourses of youth and youth policy are instrumentalised to legitimise ruling elites, to distinguish the good (acquiescent) from the bad (rebellious or apathetic) youth, and to control them all.⁴² It creates categories of youth (unemployed graduates, NEETS, *harraga*, *hittistes*,⁴³ street kids, terrorists, criminals, etc), which are embedded in institutions and establish the “facts” of the “youth problem”.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, youth participation and representation is closely circumscribed, channelled either through discredited and youth-resistant political parties, civil society and social entrepreneurship networks which effectively depoliticise them, or so-called youth parliaments and youth pacts which offer voice but no genuine access to power.⁴⁵ With corruption and the arbitrary application of law predominating, SEM youth expressed consistently low levels of trust in, or engagement with all political institutions and some social institutions. In the POWER2YOUTH survey, parliaments, political parties and central governments were consistently trusted by less than 30 percent (and often less than 20 percent) of young people.

When the formal institutions of society are unreliable and have little social buy-in, society at large becomes a place of insecurity, fear and even violence. Although families and extended families were largely trusted, only between 8 percent (Turkey) and 39 percent (Egypt) of respondents thought that most people can be trusted. Between 30 percent (Morocco) and 44 percent (Palestine) said that they had either not very much trust or no trust at all in their neighbours. Between 34 percent (Lebanon) and 43 percent (Turkey) had not very much or no trust at all in their work colleagues and the vast majority in all countries had little or not trust in strangers, people of other religions or other nationalities. This can be accounted for in part by the way in which violence within societies goes unchecked by formal institutions.⁴⁶ The coercive tendencies of SEM states, their lack of regard for human and civil rights, their willingness to enable, endorse or turn a blind eye to direct (violence ???) against citizens and their inability to curtail (or even collusion with) violence *within* society (manifesting itself in protection rackets, gang violence, human trafficking, domestic violence, sexual harassment in public places, even unregulated and dangerous public transport and infrastructure), all mean that personal and physical insecurity is pervasive for young people and especially for young women. We were told by one female respondent: “We have to psychologically prepare ourselves for going out.” Others said, “If someone well-connected hurts you, you can do nothing ... and everyone is well-connected.”; “Even when I go out with my friends and we are four girls, I still do not feel safe.”⁴⁷ A Tunisian respondent said, “It is as simple as not having anything to fear. As a young woman I think I would be fully safe if I could go out at

⁴² Substantiation required ???

⁴³ NEET, a person who is not in education, employment or training; *harraga*, an informal migrant who burns his/her identity papers as s/he leaves the country; *hittiste*, one who ‘holds up the wall’ – a reference to young Algerian men standing idle in the streets.

⁴⁴ Catusse, M. and Destremau, B. (2016: 13-15) reference missing at the end ???

⁴⁵ Requires substantiation ???

⁴⁶ This sentence, which leads on to the next, requires substantiation ???

⁴⁷ All from Focus Group Beirut, December 2016.

night and have a stroll without needing to fear anything, without fearing being raped or killed or robbed.” A Palestinian female remarked, “We are safe only in our families.”⁴⁸

Fear of violence impinging on young peoples’ capacity to be mobile beyond the home impacts on men as well. One Tunisian remarked, “The level of security threat is really high; you have bombing, stealing...”, while Palestinian young people repeatedly referred to the constant sense of threat from Israeli soldiers.⁴⁹ Fear of violence in response to political or civil activism from the state institutions was also common. One Tunisian male remarked, “Human rights violations are still being conducted in Tunisian prisons on a daily basis. These are real concerns for me”, while another said, “you cannot fall back on institutions like the police and believe you are secure; you are not.”⁵⁰

The omnipresent perception of threat or being surveilled was evident in survey responses to questions about freedom. For example, between just 21 percent (Palestine) and 47 percent (Lebanon) felt “completely free” to express their ideas and opinions in their communities; between 27 percent (Palestine) and 45 percent (Lebanon) felt free to express themselves freely on the internet; and just 11 percent (Palestine) and 36 percent (Lebanon) felt free to express themselves at the national level. The consequences of becoming visible to authority were not simply political: as one young Palestinian said:

There’s a rule all young people know about: if you get involved in politics, sooner or later, you’ll end up in prison, whether it’s an Israeli or a Palestinian one. For a woman, the consequences can be devastating. Besides the physical and psychological effects of being in prison, there’s a risk that you’ll never find a husband, because this is still a very conservative society and there are all kinds of rumours than can harm a woman’s reputation if she’s been in prison.⁵¹

It is worth reflecting that in the survey young people consistently rated security as equally or *more* important than democracy and nowhere more so than in Palestine and Lebanon (both 91 percent). The impact of insecurity on well-being was also evident: between 22 percent (Turkey) and 59 percent (Egypt) of young people said they had not felt “calm and relaxed” during the previous two weeks.

Ontological insecurity and the future

Thus, with lives (unequally and differentially) characterised by economic, social, political and physical insecurity, SEM youth find themselves marginalised not only from the *body politik* and society as a whole, but also from the narratives, discourses and meanings which construct them. It is not just a case of inter-generational differences in expectation and entitlements inducing perceptions of relative deprivation, although that certainly plays a part: rather it is a shared form of ontological insecurity⁵² in which young people’s everyday bears

⁴⁸ Focus Group Tunis, November 2016 and Focus Group Nablus, November 2016.

⁴⁹ Focus Group Tunisia, November 2016 and Focus Group Nablus, November 2016, respectively.

⁵⁰ Both Focus Group Tunisia, November 2016.

⁵¹ Belkaid and Pironet, “Palestine’s Pent-Up Young”.

⁵² Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

little or no relation to the present or futures which society as a whole constructs for them. Young people are forced, by coercion or by necessity, to live “as if”, as if their futures will be better (more prosperous, more free and more safe), as if they are still transitioning to the format for adulthood which is sustained by social benchmarks of material independence and personal autonomy, and political benchmarks of citizenship and participation. For many, if not most, however, the reality of living today is profoundly different and offers few direct pathways or opportunities to make progress towards that future status. As SAHWA researchers concluded:

Many of the young people we spoke with shared similar narratives about the future: there wasn't really any point in having an ambition because there was no sense of security.⁵³

As one young Tunisian man said, “All our anxieties are coming from our fears of the future”. A young Tunisian woman remarked, “My ambition defines me.; it is a part of my identity and if I cannot get to the future then my identity is missing as an independent woman.”⁵⁴

Instead, a painful aspect of these multiple-insecurities is the necessity for many SEM youth to live in what has been termed “the extended present”.⁵⁵ Securing the present and avoiding risk becomes the young person's life code. As one Lebanese youth said, “Whenever we make decisions we tend to go for safety – whether this is about money, education, walking in the streets.”⁵⁶

For a large part of the generational cohort, this resonates with a finding of Alcinda Honwana in her research on young people in Africa. The extended present, this profound insecurity of life-stage progression, becomes a status of permanent ‘waithood’ and an alternative format of adulthood.⁵⁷ In a paradox of painful proportions, the world around SEM youth is changing rapidly, offering them a very different lived experience from that of their parents; yet the possibilities for their own futures are diminished and many seem stuck in a condition of constantly navigating the contradictions of the present, of ‘making do’ and ‘getting by’. Unable to progress to conventional adulthood, they lack a security of place and status which largely defines their experience as ‘youth’.

Arguably, this kind of ontological insecurity of youth – this discrepancy between public norms, narratives and performances on the one hand, and lived meanings on the other – is nothing new. Much has been made in youth studies, and sociology more broadly, of the uncertainty of modern life.⁵⁸ Zygmunt Bauman coined the term ‘liquid modernity’ to describe “the fluidity of norm, institution, and social category so characteristic of our present

⁵³ Maïche *et al.*, *Breaking the triple marginalisation*, 11.

⁵⁴ Both Focus Group Tunis November 2016.

⁵⁵ Nowotny, *Time*, 58.

⁵⁶ Focus Group Beirut December 2016.

⁵⁷ Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 19-37.

⁵⁸ France, *Understanding Youth in Late Modernity*, 59-77.

period”, while Jock Young describes the post-modern phenomenon of ‘vertigo’ (fear of falling or of downward mobility), which he deems to be the condition of today’s middle classes.⁵⁹ But both these authors were referring principally to post-industrial, post-modern, globalised societies and – whilst they captured much of the fall-out from the transformatory impact of global liberal capital as it is experienced by SEM youth – they are less able to speak to the additional insecurities imposed by authoritarian political contexts and the semi-periphery status of national economies. Nor are they inclusive of the marginalising impacts of conflict, war, religious and cultural specificities. So whilst youth globally might experience similar securitising impacts arising from their front-line status as hegemonic neoliberal capital transforms global labour markets and economic conditions, the experience of SEM youth, as documented by POWER2YOUTH, suggests there are locally-specific and multiplying impacts of ‘living beyond the core’ which amount in this case to hyper-precarity.

SEM youth, (in)security and the neoliberal subject

In 2011, Rob MacDonald asked the question: what are youth studies *for*? Since youth, being a socially constructed category, is defined variably in different locations and contexts and we cannot provide precision as to whom exactly is included in the object of study, he asked what analytical gain there is to be had from the study of youth, or young people, in any one specific context or location. He provides the answer himself: “the valuable, possibly unique, position youth research has as a window on processes of social change and social continuity.... If new social trends emerge it is feasible that they will be seen first, or more obviously, among the coming, new generation of adults.”⁶⁰

Contrasting with a dominant narrative of the securitisation of youth, this article has argued that the POWER2YOUTH research on SEM youth has unveiled a process of *insecuritisation*, creating and expanding the various components of an insecure life (what one might even think of as the antithesis of human security). Lacking access to institutions and networks of power, SEM young people are at the front-line of the precariatization of the region’s labour force. The material insecurities created by precarious employment are compounded by political and physical insecurities generated by authoritarian (or at best non-democratic) regimes, the latter drawing on conservative socio-cultural constructions to legitimise the subordination of youth. As the narratives, discourses and policies which are developed to control youth progressively diverge further and further away from the lived realities of young people themselves, SEM youth are experiencing acute forms of ontological insecurity. Moreover, like their peers in other peripheral locations, they are at risk of becoming locked into a status of ‘waithood’ or ‘transition’, which is in reality an alternative version of adulthood and a potentially permanent state of hyper-precarious living.

This argument suggests the urgency of moving beyond the current format of securitised framings of youth, especially when they have become as all-pervading as in regard to Arab, Muslim or ‘Southern’ populations. Claire Metelits has argued powerfully against the proposition that states are the agents best tasked with securing stability and that this is best achieved through the securitisation of discourse and policy.⁶¹ Securitising discourse on

⁵⁹ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; and Young, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*.

⁶⁰ MacDonald, “Youth transitions, unemployment and underemployment, 1-2.

⁶¹ Metelits, *Security in Africa*.

populations, or sub-sets within them, by subordinating them to a logic of state-led stabilisation, depoliticises them, depriving them of their own agency in determining what constitutes a desirable stability. POWER2YOUTH tells us something more: security should not be understood as the necessary stability and preservation of the neoliberal order or the state which upholds it, but rather as an aspiration for the lived everyday experiences of the peoples under its governance. For SEM youth, hyper-precarious living – this multi-dimensional insecurity – is the price they are paying for the ‘security’ of the prevailing political economy.

Moreover, the experiences of SEM youth made visible by POWER2YOUTH, like those of Honwana’s respondents in Africa, suggest that when we look at youth today, we are looking through a window into the future. The local insecuritisation of SEM (or indeed African) youth today is a foretelling of the global future of the neoliberal everyday and its spatial, as much as temporal distinctions.⁶² To be distracted by securitisation stories is to miss the lesson of future history and how it will differentiate the lives of all of us according to spatial and geo-economic location.

Notes on Contributor

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⁶² Farrugia, *Spaces of Youth*.

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