



We Are
MENA

Architects of the New Middle East and North Africa

**The Role of Youth in Promoting Cross-Border
Collaboration & Regionalism**

May 2026

Research Management and Writing: Einat Levi

Researcher: Dr. Aicha Knidiri

Analyst: Taha Benjelloun

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About the Network

WeAreMENA is a regional platform connecting youth-focused organizations, institutions, educators, and emerging leaders from across the Middle East and North Africa.

By investing in leadership, education, regional partnerships, and cross-border opportunities, WeAreMENA is helping shape the next generation of regional leadership and strengthening the human infrastructure for a more connected, resilient, and cooperative future.

Founders' Foreword

“The youth are humanity’s eternal possibility for happiness”

Over recent decades, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have endured some of the world’s most persistent and complex cycles of conflict and instability. Civil wars, regional conflicts, terrorism, state collapse and severe political crises have become an inseparable part of life for millions of people. Even now, the war that began on October 7, 2023, continues to reverberate across the region, leaving behind pain, loss, destruction and uncertainty.

An entire generation across the MENA region has come of age amid fear, polarization, dehumanization, and bloodshed. It is a generation that knows all too well the costs of violence and extremism yet still retains the capacity to imagine a different future.

In the final days of the First World War in 1918, a conflict that shook the world with a force unprecedented in history, the philosopher Martin Buber wrote: “Youth are humanity’s eternal possibility for happiness.” Buber understood youth not merely as a biological stage of life, but as a moral and historical force capable of renewing human society precisely in moments of crisis. He believed that in periods of profound upheaval, the younger generation could rise against cynicism, despair and hate, and act instead out of idealism, shared interests, responsibility and hope.

More than a century later, this idea appears to find tangible expression in the work of hundreds of youth organizations and educational initiatives across the MENA region. Despite violence, fear, and polarization, youth throughout the region continue to choose dialogue, education, intercultural engagement, and the building of regional partnerships.

This conviction lies at the heart of WeAreMENA — a regional platform connecting youth-focused organizations, institutions, educators, and emerging leaders across the MENA region. By investing in social entrepreneurship, education, and cross-border collaborations, we are helping shape the next generation of regional leadership and strengthening the human infrastructure for a more connected, resilient, and cooperative future. This study examines the role of youth, youth organizations, and educational initiatives in promoting cross-border cooperation, building trust and advancing regionalization processes across the Middle East and North Africa. It seeks to examine how person-to-person encounters, educational frameworks and civic initiatives can help shape a younger generation that sees the region not only as an arena of conflict, but also as a space for partnership, opportunity, mutual recognition, and a shared future.

The study draws on the mapping and analysis of 125 organizations and initiatives from 26 countries across the region, alongside in-depth interviews and an analysis of key trends in the field. It grew out of the recognition that, despite the development of civic initiatives and youth organizations throughout the MENA region, there remains a significant gap in the knowledge, data, and research infrastructure available to decision-makers, international institutions and civil society actors seeking to understand in depth the potential of youth as a force for promoting moderation, strengthening regional ties, and building a more stable human infrastructure for the region’s future.

The study also draws on the experience gained in recent years through the work of WeAreMENA and is guided by the conviction that impact-driven collaborations and encounters between youth, educators, and communities are not peripheral to the region’s reality, nor merely a marginal supplement to political and economic peace processes, but rather an essential part of the human infrastructure needed to shape more stable neighborly relations, regional cooperation, shared opportunities, and a more interconnected and hopeful future across the MENA region.

We believe that the future of the Middle East and North Africa depends on the next generation’s ability to connect, collaborate, and lead together across borders, societies, and sectors.

Let it be
Tom Vize

Founder and Executive Director, WeAreMENA Network

Acknowledgments

The completion of this study is far more than the conclusion of a research project or policy document. It is a living testament to the power of human connection and shared vision across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region where separation and disagreement are often the default.

First and foremost, my deepest gratitude goes to **Tom Vize**, my partner on this journey and the founder of WeAreMENA, the network of youth organizations that initiated and advanced this study, for his full trust in the process and for the resources allocated to the project. This support enabled me to embark on a journey of discovery within the fascinating regional ecosystem of youth organizations, knowing that the study's findings would serve as a practical compass for the network's work and for those engaged in regionalism and in promoting cooperation across MENA.

Special thanks to our partners, **Dr. Firas Habbal** and **Dr. Fawaz Habbal** of Emirates Scholar Research Center, for their fruitful collaboration, and for providing the platform and visibility that allow us to share the study's insights and make them accessible to audiences across MENA and beyond.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the dedicated research team that accompanied me throughout this meticulous undertaking:

To **Aicha Knidiri**, who led the mapping and interview phase with great skill. Her professionalism and sensitivity conducting these conversations generated invaluable insights, enabling us to understand and faithfully reflect the importance of youth organizations in the emerging regionalization processes.

To **Taha Benjelloun**, for his professional assistance in locating and analyzing information. His contribution to mapping the national strategies of countries across the region, as well as the youth ecosystem, was essential to understanding the state-level perspective and to developing a nuanced picture of the complex regional landscape as it appears at this critical moment.

My thanks and appreciation also go to the youth organization leaders who opened their doors and generously gave their time. These interviews, especially during such a turbulent and challenging period, were a daily reminder of the resilience, hope, pragmatism, and creativity of the generation now shaping the new regionalism.

On a personal note, I am grateful for the privilege of living and working in Rabat, Morocco – a beacon of tolerance, and interfaith and multicultural partnership, which has been, and remains, a source of wisdom, inspiration, and direct connection to MENA. This study also offers an opportunity to put into words, and to pass on, insights I have gained over fifteen years of working to build bridges and foster human connection across the region.

These insights are the fruit of countless conversations, encounters, and moments of grace. May they serve all those who believe that youth are a source of hope, and that the region's future is already being written – from the bottom up.

Einat Levi, May 2026

Executive Summary

1. Significance of the Study: Youth as Regional Architects of the New MENA

At the heart of this study lie two intertwined challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): the challenge of the younger generation and the challenge of regionalism or regional integration. On the one hand, the region is characterized by an exceptionally young population, with those aged 15–29 comprising about a quarter of its residents – some 165 million people. This generation faces some of the highest unemployment rates in the world, gaps in key skills, a high regional rate of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET), and the phenomenon of “Waithood” – a prolonged waiting period that delays the transition to economic maturity, independence, and full integration into society.

On the other hand, the MENA region is in the midst of a new wave of regional momentum in infrastructure, economics, and technological connectivity, as evidenced by regional initiatives, trade corridors, energy investments, innovation, and political agreements such as the Abraham Accords. However, infrastructure connectivity like IMEC, is no guarantee of social integration. Despite these developments, the region continues to be characterized by political fragmentation, ongoing conflicts, radicalization, and regional crises. The destruction caused by the war that erupted on October 7, 2023, further reinforces the urgent need to answer the question: How can we create a shared future and develop sustainable regional cooperation in a space saturated with mistrust, pain, and politicization?

The intersection of these two challenges underlies the premise of this study: youth are not merely a social-economic “problem” or a target audience for policy, but rather key strategic actors in shaping the region’s future. Connections to the regional and international spheres may offer a solution to some of the internal challenges facing the younger generation. Precisely because they are a dynamic, digitally connected, flexible, and enterprising generation, young men and women sometimes succeed in overcoming persistent barriers and establishing new forms of civic regionalism that grow step by step from the bottom up. In this spirit, this study seeks to examine **the role of youth organizations in promoting cross-border cooperation and regionalism in the Middle East and North Africa.**

2. The Conceptual Framework

The study is grounded in five conceptual lenses: **the New Regionalism Approach, Elicitive Peacebuilding, Youth Diplomacy, Networked Society, and Adaptive Resilience.** The New Regionalism Approach views regional integration as both a state-institutional process and a civil society process that emerges from the grassroots. The concept of Elicitive Peacebuilding emphasizes that trust and peace are built gradually through ongoing encounters, joint action and the resolution of concrete problems, rather than solely through formal agreements. The concept of a Networked Society explains how youth operate through cross-border digital, professional, and civic networks. Youth Diplomacy positions youth as partners in shaping the global agenda – as agents of change and “norm entrepreneurs” – while Adaptive Resilience demonstrates the continued operation of youth organizations even under conditions of crisis, risk, and uncertainty.

Together, these ideas point to a broader regional reality: youth can bridge both the macro and micro dimensions of regional cooperation — transforming ideas of connectivity, leadership, and integration into practical partnerships, opportunities, and collaborative action across societies and sectors. In doing so, the next generation should not be viewed merely as a passive audience, but as an active force helping shape the human infrastructure for a more connected, resilient, and cooperative Middle East and North Africa.

3. The Regional Youth Ecosystem

The regional youth ecosystem consists of four interdependent levels of actors: the national level, which includes government ministries and national agencies dedicated to shaping policy in this domain; the regional and minilateral level (such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Union for the Mediterranean, and the Arab Youth Center), which operates flexibly to promote cooperation but whose initiatives are often temporary; the multilateral and international level (UN agencies, the World Bank, and the European Union), which provides a research and financial infrastructure through a “top-down” approach, but is at times insufficiently attuned to the local context; and the civil society level, which is the most dynamic layer and includes NGOs and civil society organizations, community initiatives and cross-border professional networks, enabling alternative, complementary, and competing channels of action.

The organizations’ efforts focus on six main spheres developing cross-border ties and building trust: education and vocational training, academia, civic and political engagement, environmental activism, innovation and entrepreneurship, and culture. However, in the absence of institutional coordination and a stable infrastructure, the multitude of actors and arenas in the region tends to fragment into isolated, largely disconnected activities, and has not yet developed into an integrated ecosystem and a regional civil society.

4. Country Case Studies: How Are States Integrating Youth?

The study examined three country case studies – the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Jordan – representing the diversity that characterizes the various subregions of the Middle East: the Gulf, North Africa, and the Levant:

A. United Arab Emirates (UAE) - Top-down Approach and Innovation Diplomacy: The UAE has undergone a process of accelerated institutionalization, including the establishment of the Federal Youth Authority (FYA) and the formulation of the “National Youth Agenda 2031.” Youth are viewed there as “ambassadors of soft power” and are integrated into international forums (such as COP) to promote a narrative of tolerance, progress, and innovation (for example, their involvement in the “Amal” space project). The approach is centralized but allocates significant resources to position youth as a global strategic anchor.

B. Morocco - Youth as a pillar of stability in the wake of threats of radicalization: Under the patronage of King Mohammed VI, Morocco views youth as a driving force for national development and a means of curbing frustration and radicalization. The Kingdom leverages young leadership to develop channels of cultural and faith-based diplomacy, positioning young Moroccans as a geopolitical bridge between Europe, Africa, and the Middle East through international leadership programs.

C. Jordan - Youth as agents of peace and security: Despite limited resources and demographic pressures due to waves of refugees, Jordan has established itself as a global pioneer in the field of “youth diplomacy.” Led by Crown Prince Hussein, the Kingdom initiated UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (Youth, Peace, and Security), which defined youth as “a promise, not a threat” and as partners in preventing radicalization and shaping peace policy.

5. Voices from the Field: Insights from Interviews with Leaders of Youth Organizations in the Middle East and North Africa

An analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with leaders of youth organizations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) reveals six key themes that reflect their modus operandi to develop and maintain cross-border and regional collaborations:

- **A shift from ideological discourse to “co-creation”:** Youth organizations prefer to avoid abstract ideological debates and instead focus on creating joint projects addressing practical challenges such as water, climate, technological innovation, coexistence and interfaith relations. The relationships formed through the execution and implementation of a joint project foster close communication and enable the

establishment of trust and a sense of partnership. This, in turn, encourages more personal dialogue and the ability to tolerate differences based on personal acquaintance rather than ideological positions.

- **Becoming familiar with the 'Other' through shared heritage:** Organizations are developing cross-border collaborations rooted in a shared history and cultural heritage. The goal is to foster understanding based on common denominators, while breaking down psychological barriers and dispelling stereotypes prevalent on social media. For example, preserving Jewish heritage in Morocco as part of the broader Moroccan narrative helps create common ground between Muslims and Jews living in Morocco and beyond.
- **Adaptive Resilience and "Quiet Operations":** In a dynamic, conflict-ridden environment, youth organizations develop the ability to survive. In times of acute crisis (such as the period since October 2023), organizations withdraw from the public sphere and adopt an "under the radar" strategy to protect the safety of their activists while maintaining operational continuity and communication channels.
- **Women's leadership as a driving force and catalyst:** Young women offer models of inclusivity, compassion, and problem-solving that challenge traditional hierarchical political structures. They are at the forefront of peacebuilding, minority rights and the prevention of radicalization, and are proving to be a decisive factor in social cohesion and regional integration.
- **Technology as a tool for overcoming physical barriers:** When political restrictions prevent movement, technology – such as augmented reality (AR) for preserving heritage sites or online learning and communication platforms – becomes an everyday means of establishing an ecosystem of knowledge, dialogue, and cross-border collaboration.
- **The Diaspora as a Civil "Sandbox":** Young men and women from MENA who have access to – or live in – Europe or the United States are taking advantage of these relatively open (though not challenge-free) environments to overcome structural and political barriers. In the diaspora, they are exposed to new people and ideas, gain access to additional and often more stable funding sources, and experiment with models of coexistence (for example, between immigrants from Syria and Turkey living in Germany). Thus, they expand the comfort zone of youth organizations in the region and export the insights and ideas they have encountered as "new norms" back to their communities of origin.

6. Key barriers and challenges:

Despite the enormous potential, youth's capacity to promote regional development faces several barriers and challenges:

- **Structural and geopolitical barriers:** Strict visa and travel restrictions prevent face-to-face interaction, which is critical for building trust. At the same time, a shared regional identity in MENA is relatively weak, and as a result, regional initiatives are met with alienation and cynicism against the backdrop of historical and ongoing violent conflicts. Furthermore, there is a noticeable decline in youth's trust in official institutions, and gender barriers still limit the full participation of young women, who often struggle to attain public or regional leadership positions.
- **Cultural differences and a lack of familiarity with the region:** MENA is a complex region comprising various subregions – such as the Gulf, the Levant, and North Africa – each with its own distinct history, social structure, political culture, and patterns of action and behavior. In addition to being the birthplace of the major monotheistic religions, the region is characterized by a multitude of languages, dialects, ethnic groups, religious communities, national identities, and historical memories. This complexity creates great potential for encounter, learning, and regional creativity, but also leads to gaps in understanding, sensitivities, stereotypes, and mistrust among youth and organizations from different countries and

subregions. Consequently, cross-border collaborations may encounter challenges related to cultural translation, misunderstandings, mismatched expectations and difficulty in establishing a common language. Therefore, developing intercultural learning skills, familiarity with the diverse Middle Eastern region, and the ability to act sensitively within a multi-identity reality are fundamental prerequisites for building sustainable regional collaborations.

- **Economic barriers:** Many youth organizations in the region operate under conditions of chronic resource scarcity, making it difficult for them to retain staff, preserve organizational knowledge, maintain regional connections, and ensure continuous operations. Most rely on external, competitive and short-term funding, which is typically allocated to one-off projects rather than building long-term organizational infrastructure. As a result, organizations are forced to devote a significant portion of their resources to survival, fundraising, and reporting to donors, rather than to developing strategy, deepening partnerships, and expanding regional impact. A lack of core funding – which includes funding for professional staff, knowledge management, evaluation systems, strategic planning, digital security, and the maintenance of partner networks – undermines organizations' ability to transform one-off initiatives into stable frameworks for action. Therefore, the financial barrier is not merely insufficient funding for projects, but a lack of investment in the organizational infrastructure necessary to build resilience, continuity, and sustainable cross-border collaborations.

- **Skills and Competency Gaps:** Alongside political and economic barriers, many youth organizations face gaps in the skills required to manage complex regional collaborations. Cross-border activities require capabilities that are not always acquired through standard education or training programs: managing multi-party partnerships, mediation and conflict resolution, intercultural communication, project management in sensitive environments, resource mobilization, impact assessment, secure digital work, and a geopolitical understanding of the region. In the absence of these skills, many initiatives remain dependent on personal leadership or initial enthusiasm, but struggle to develop into stable and sustainable frameworks. Therefore, building professional capacity for youth diplomacy and regional cooperation is a key prerequisite for transforming isolated initiatives into a sustainable regional civil society ecosystem.

7. Operational recommendations:

To translate youth's potential to promote cross-border and regional cooperation in MENA into a sustainable strategy, the study offers the following recommendations:

A. Strengthening youth organizations and providing core funding: In the context of developing cross-border collaborations, youth organizations serve as a critical platform, as they are capable of creating mechanisms and establishing deep, long-term partnerships. Hence, the funding mix of philanthropic and international foundations must shift from short-term projects to investment in the organizations' internal capacities (staff, knowledge management, evaluation, strategic planning). Such investment will build and strengthen adaptive resilience, enabling organizations to weather political upheavals. Furthermore, priority should be given to supporting organizations open to collaboration with the entire Middle East, across its diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious spectrums, to encourage the establishment of frameworks that will connect the separate parts of the ecosystem.

B. Shifting from ideological discourse to projects based on co-creation: Prioritizing funding for projects that address concrete issues such as employment, water, climate, and technological innovation. This approach alleviates political tensions, generates a focus on the work itself, and builds trust that helps strengthen the common interest.

C. Creating "safe spaces" and supporting discreet activities: Partners and donors must recognize that in times of a security crisis, a project's lack of public visibility is not a weakness but an essential strategy. Spaces that allow youth to operate with partial transparency must be supported so as not to expose them

to social or security risks.

D. Investing in the diaspora and integrating it into the ecosystem: The study's findings indicate that MENA diaspora in Europe and the West serves as a bridge and an "incubator" for the creation of regional civil partnerships. Therefore, there is strategic importance in investing in diaspora communities as "bridging spaces" for regional development and their integration into frameworks of Middle Eastern action.

E. Institutional integration of youth organizations into official frameworks: Establishing quotas and permanent representation for youth networks in multilateral forums, regional conferences, and the processes of implementing political agreements, to ensure that the vision of regionalism is incorporated into the field and does not remain solely at the leadership level.

F. Empowering women leaders and developing regional digital platforms: Targeted support should be provided to networks led by young women (with an emphasis on the areas of reconciliation and community), and online digital spaces should be established to facilitate learning, entrepreneurship, and professional training – serving as an accessible alternative when physical borders are closed.

G. Professional training in "youth diplomacy" and the adoption of minilateral models: developing skill sets for activists (mediation, negotiation, crisis management) and promoting small, flexible civil coalitions centered on specific interests, which provide a space for faster and more effective action than broad, rigid institutions. Appendix C proposes a competency model in this field.

8. Conclusion:

The study reveals a critical gap in MENA. While the region is experiencing momentum in economic, technological, and infrastructural connectivity, social integration remains limited, as it cannot be built solely through railways, gas pipelines, or political agreements between leaders. These infrastructures, important as they may be, will not endure over time without a broad and flexible civil infrastructure, grounded in human trust, mutual familiarity, and cross-border civil networks.

Herein lies the need for a paradigm shift. Instead of viewing the younger generation as a challenge to be addressed, it must be recognized as a strategic partner in shaping the region's future and as an active force shaping civic regionalism. In a complex and conflict-ridden environment, they can translate an abstract regional vision into the daily practice of cooperation and civic initiatives, while connecting local needs with regional and international opportunities.

The work of youth organizations takes place through personal encounters, collaborative projects, and cross-border community initiatives. It is precisely these spaces – which are not always on the political agenda – that build a regional network of connections and provide it with social resilience. Therefore, investing in youth organizations and networks is not merely an investment in the future employment of the next generation, but a foundational investment in the civic infrastructure essential for prosperity, stability, and cohesion in MENA.

Transforming the region from a space of conflict into an integrative one depends on sustained and institutional investment in the ability of these youth to continue building regionalism from the bottom up – as an engine of growth, trust, and stability for the entire region.

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Introduction and Methodology

At the heart of this study are two key, interrelated challenges in the Middle East: the challenge of the younger generation and the challenge of regionalism. The challenge of the younger generation concerns a demographic group that constitutes a significant portion of the region's population, with those aged 15–29 making up about a quarter of the population in many countries in MENA and North Africa (UN DESA, 2022; World Bank, 2023). This generation faces an urgent need for economic security, a sense of belonging and the creation of prospects for a decent future, against a backdrop of high youth unemployment rates, skills gaps, and significant numbers of youth not in employment, education, or training (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2018; UNDP, 2021). Youth in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region are no longer content to merely survive within the existing reality, but aspire to realize their potential and become active partners in shaping their own destinies. However, in many cases, existing state frameworks struggle to fully address these aspirations.

The second challenge is that of regionalism. Despite the diplomatic momentum of recent years, and particularly in the context of the Abraham Accords, MENA remains one of the least integrated regions in the world, especially in terms of economic and social integration (World Bank, 2010; World Bank, 2021). This difficulty stems not only from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or from relations between Israel and the countries of the region, but also from a broad web of regional rifts: the Iraq War since 2003, the internal Palestinian division since 2006–2007, the civil wars in Syria and Libya since 2011, the war in Yemen since 2014–2015, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the crisis between Qatar and the Gulf states in 2017–2021, the political and economic crisis in Lebanon since 2019, the war in Sudan since 2023, and the ongoing regional war following the events of October 7, 2023 (Fawcett, 2019; Del Sarto, 2017). This multitude of crises illustrates that regionalism in MENA is developing within a space characterized by civil wars, struggles for influence, sectarian and ideological tensions, closed borders, crises of trust, and the weakness of regional institutions.

At the intersection of these two challenges lies the potential for a possible solution: the ability of youth to serve as a bridge for building a “civic regionalism” that grows from the bottom up. Thanks to their unique characteristics – being a technologically connected, dynamic generation with fresh worldviews – youth are able to bypass some of the traditional barriers and create new patterns of civic and digital connectivity (Arab Social Media Report, 2017; UNDP, 2021).

Furthermore, in recent years we have witnessed a notable trend of growing networks, movements, and youth organizations active in a variety of fields, from climate to innovation. This trend indicates that youth should not be viewed merely as individuals acting on their own, but also as actors operating through institutional, physical, and digital platforms. This development eases the creation of mechanisms and norms for cross-border cooperation, through inter-organizational ties and by transforming regionalism from an abstract political goal into daily, ongoing action. In other words, connections “outward” to the regional sphere can provide a direct response to the “internal” challenges facing the younger generation.

Despite the significance of this trend, empirical knowledge regarding how youth organizations establish these collaborations and operate in practice remains limited. This study seeks to fill this gap and focuses on the question: What role do young men and women play in promoting regional cooperation and regionalization processes in MENA?

Accordingly, the study has four main objectives:

1. Mapping the key youth organizations in the MENA region, with an emphasis on regionally oriented organizations.
2. Analyzing the patterns of action and practices through which cooperation between organizations develops.

3. Identifying the untapped potential as well as the challenges associated with regional cooperation.
4. Proposing practical recommendations for decision-makers, youth organizations, international institutions, and funding bodies.

The study consists of five chapters. The first chapter presents the regional momentum in MENA and the conditions for the development of social integration processes. The second chapter develops the conceptual framework of “bottom-up” regionalism, defining the role of youth as architects and ambassadors of regionalism. The third chapter analyzes the youth ecosystem in the region: its characteristics, the actors involved, the arenas of action and the key challenges. The fourth chapter includes a comparative analysis of country case studies in the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Jordan. The fifth chapter presents voices from the field through a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with leaders of youth organizations in the region. The study concludes with a summary and recommendations, offering directions for action to strengthen regional cooperation among youth. Taken as a whole, the study provides a snapshot of the youth ecosystem in the region and highlights their role as architects of civic regionalism in MENA.

Methodology and Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative mapping, qualitative fieldwork, and comparative analysis, with the aim of providing a multidimensional perspective on collaborations among youth in the Middle East and North Africa (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This combination allows for a consideration of both the structural dimension of the regional ecosystem and the practices and meanings that emerge on the ground, thereby providing a comprehensive answer to the research question. The analysis is conducted at three complementary levels: the macro level, which examines the state, regional, and international systems and the mechanisms of institutional legitimization; the meso level, which focuses on the organizational and network infrastructure supporting the activity; and the micro level, which analyzes the youth population and the characteristics of Generation Z.

In accordance with this analytical framework, the study focuses on the organization as the primary unit of analysis. This choice is based on the premise that in emerging regional processes, particularly in MENA, organizations and civil society networks constitute the critical unit of action: They serve as intermediaries between individuals and broader institutional processes, provide youth with an institutional infrastructure, enable the preservation of knowledge, generate continuity and resilience beyond the actions of individuals, and serve as platforms for shaping values, collective identity, and mechanisms for cross-border cooperation (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Accordingly, the meso level – the organizational and network level – serves as the central analytical axis of the study, while the macro and micro levels serve as a complementary background. This focus guides the design of the study, the sampling strategy, and the data collection and analysis tools presented below.

Definition of the Term “Youth”: This study uses the term “youth” in accordance with the terminology commonly employed by international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank.¹ The age range used to define youth is not uniform: While the UN defines youth as those aged 15–24, many countries in the region significantly expand this definition, in part to reflect the phenomenon of “waithood” which characterizes the youth population in MENA and refers to the gap between completing one’s education and achieving economic independence. This phenomenon, stemming from high unemployment rates and the high cost of living, prolongs the transition to adulthood and sometimes pushes it into the late 30s (Kabbani, 2019). Against this backdrop, defining the age range of “youth” is not merely a demographic fact but also the basis for identifying target groups for relevant policies. Accordingly, this study adopts a broad definition of

1 In parallel, there are also complementary concepts with different emphases: “Young Adults,” which focuses on the transition to financial independence; “Emerging Adults,” an academic-psychological term describing the stage of identity formation; and “Young People,” which is sometimes used as an umbrella term. The choice of the term “Youth” is intended to allow for an examination of a broad spectrum of experiences among young people in the region.

youth as those aged 15–35, which allows for the analysis of youth during the stages of career development, identity formation, and civic leadership. This range includes Generation Z alongside younger millennials.²

Study Population and Scope: The study population consists of youth organizations operating in MENA, North Africa, and the Gulf region, and encompasses 26 countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Cyprus, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and South Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and Azerbaijan. This list reflects a notion of an “expanded Middle East and North Africa” and highlights the flexible and contextual nature of the term. This selection allows for the inclusion of a wide range of subregions, political systems, and social-economic patterns, thereby facilitating an understanding of the complexity of the connections and interactions among youth in the region. However, the large number of countries also poses a challenge, as will be detailed further on.

Mapping Youth Organizations (Quantitative Analysis): To establish the data framework, the first phase involved a systematic mapping of youth organizations in the region. As part of this phase, five leading organizations were selected from each country, resulting in a catalog comprising 125 organizations. The selection of organizations and participants in this study was based on a purposive sampling strategy, which is a central tenet of qualitative research for understanding complex social phenomena. As Patton (2002) notes, the strength of purposive sampling lies in the selection of “information-rich cases,” which allow for in-depth learning about issues of central importance to the research objective, rather than for statistical generalization. Accordingly, organizations operating at the core of youth activity in MENA – including civil society organizations and regional networks – were deliberately selected, with an emphasis on their potential to influence regional integration and a wide range of political and social contexts.

To identify key youth organizations that are not detected in an initial review, the “snowball” method is used as a supplementary approach. This method, described by Goodman (1961) and Bickman & Rog (1998) as an effective tool for identifying populations with specific characteristics through social and professional networks, allowed the initial interviewees to refer the research team to additional organizations. This combination of purposeful sampling and reliance on the recommendations of the youth organizations themselves helped ensure that the mapping would be comprehensive and dynamic and would be based on the accumulated knowledge of those working in the field. This process helped validate the findings and create a rich database reflecting the interactions and current trends in the regional youth scene.

The mapping catalog was developed based on 22 structured criteria, including the type of organization, field of activity, target audience, geographic scope of activity, the extent to which youth are involved in the leadership of the organization and involvement in cross-border collaborations. In addition, structural and economic characteristics were examined, such as year of establishment, workforce size, funding sources and involvement in regional initiatives.

In-depth interviews and questionnaires (qualitative analysis): The empirical research population for the qualitative layer was derived from the organizational mapping catalog. Ten prominent organizations were selected, representing different subregions within the area as well as ethnic and religious diversity, with which semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Concurrently, online questionnaires were distributed to organizational leaders to assess their perceptions regarding the organizational skills and capabilities required for the development and maintenance of regional collaborations. The analysis was conducted using an inductive approach, identifying recurring categories from the data itself, coding key themes and comparing cases. This process made it possible to uncover structural patterns and operational practices that span different national contexts. All interviews were conducted in

² Generation Z typically refers to young people born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s, who have been shaped by a digital, global, and networked reality. Members of this generation grew up in a world of instant communication, social media, and widespread access to information; as a result, they tend to operate in online spaces, create cross-border networks, and develop identities and influences that extend beyond the national framework alone.

accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research, ensuring transparency, informed consent, and participant confidentiality as necessary and upon their request. To strengthen the reliability of the findings, a triangulation approach was employed, combining various data sources (quantitative mapping, in-depth interviews, and questionnaires) and comparing findings from different countries.

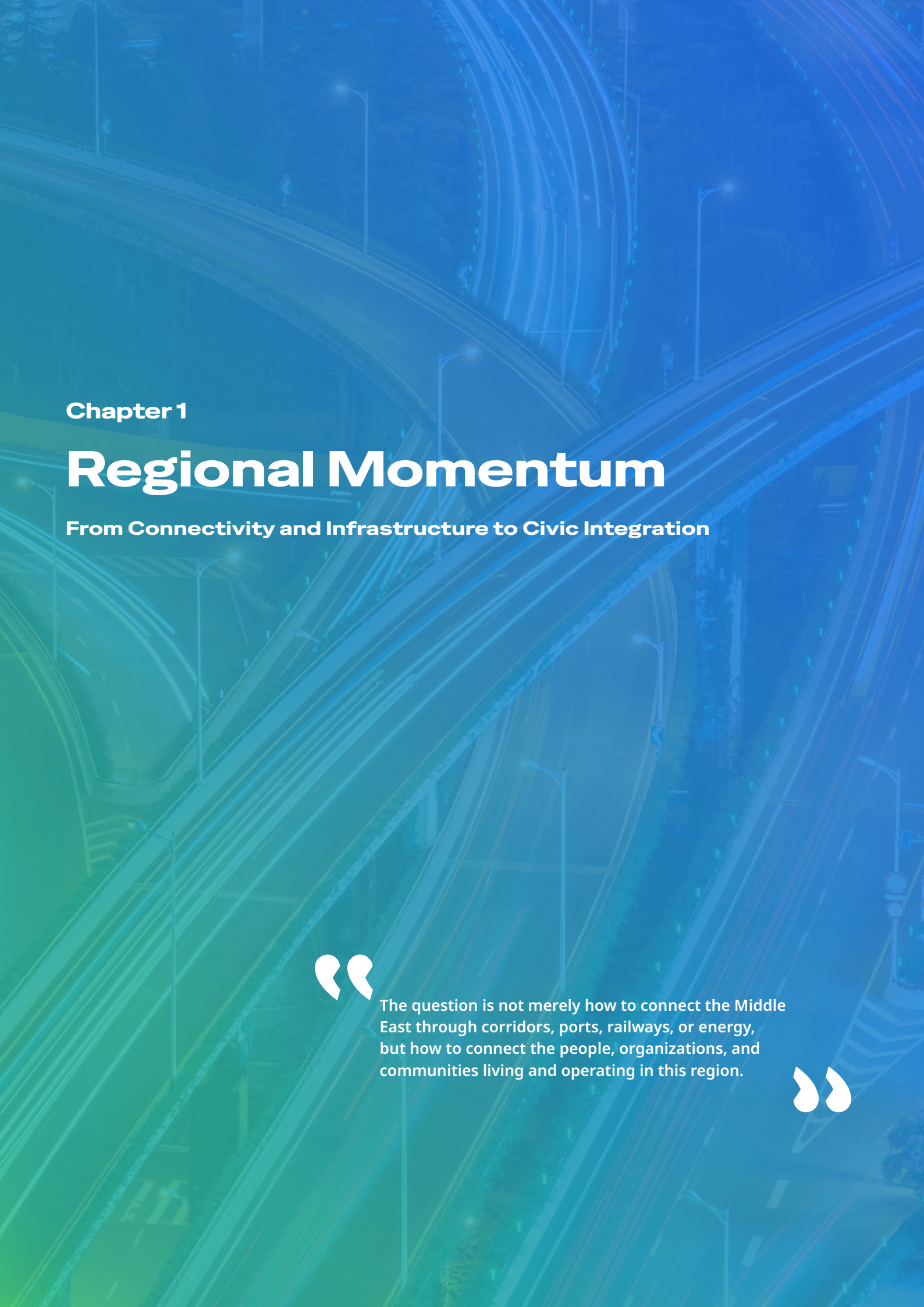
The quantitative and qualitative data collection took place between September 2025 and April 2026, against the backdrop of regional upheaval. This period served as a “test case” for regional cooperation: on the one hand, it posed significant constraints and challenges to civil society activity, and on the other, it revealed the ability of organizations to continue and even deepen cross-border cooperation, particularly in civil and digital spheres.

A comparative analysis of country case studies: To deepen our understanding at the subregional level, the study included cases from three different subregions across MENA: the United Arab Emirates as an example from the Gulf region, Morocco as an example from North Africa, and Jordan as an example from the Levant – three countries with distinct political and historical characteristics. This selection was intended to illustrate the structural differences among the region’s countries and the diverse ways in which youth are integrated into political, social, economic, and regional processes.

Research Challenges: Conducting research on inter-organizational collaboration among youth organizations in MENA during such a volatile period presented a series of complex methodological and conceptual challenges. The first challenge stemmed from the significant structural differences among the countries included in the mapping, ranging from the Gulf area characterized by vast economic resources to countries embroiled in civil wars and ongoing conflicts, such as Libya and Syria. This diversity requires great caution when attempting to establish uniform definitions for concepts such as “youth” or “civil society,” as these take on different cultural and political meanings depending on the local context. In addition, there is a need to address the “visibility bias” that shifts the focus toward organizations with a prominent digital presence and access to the international arena, while constantly striving to reach local and authentic initiatives that often operate far from the spotlight.

It should be noted that data collection was directly affected by the current war in the region. While this period served as a kind of “test” of the resilience of these collaborations, it also created barriers to accessing interviewees. In some countries, the very act of participating in a study dealing with regionalism and cross-border ties was perceived as sensitive from a security standpoint, which required the research team to exercise a high degree of ethical sensitivity and take strict measures to ensure the confidentiality and security of the participants. This challenge carried over into the analysis phase, where data cross-checking was required to distinguish between optimistic self-reports from organizations and the complex reality on the ground. Finally, the study faced a fundamental conceptual challenge regarding the stability of youth networks and organizations. In many cases, the strength of regional cooperation relies on the capabilities and influence of individual leaders, raising questions about the ability to produce long-term institutional continuity in a fragmented political landscape.

The attempt to paint a real-time picture of the current situation, amid rapidly shifting geopolitical realities, required a delicate balance between research objectivity and a deep understanding of the human and social dynamics driving the region. Despite these challenges, the findings presented in the following chapters point to the vitality of civil society and the potential inherent in it and in the youth living and working within it to shape a new regional future.



Chapter 1

Regional Momentum

From Connectivity and Infrastructure to Civic Integration

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The question is not merely how to connect the Middle East through corridors, ports, railways, or energy, but how to connect the people, organizations, and communities living and operating in this region.

”

A. Connectivity as a Global Trend

Over the past decade, connectivity has become one of the key forces shaping global order. National borders continue to define the international system, but at the same time, the importance of infrastructure, networks, economic corridors, supply chains, information flows, and digital connections is growing. In this reality, power is measured not only by territorial control, but also by the ability to connect, integrate, and mediate between systems, markets, and societies.

The philosopher and geopolitical strategist Parag Khanna aptly captured this trend in his book *Connectography*, in which he argued that “connectivity is the new destiny.” According to Khanna, the map of the world in the 21st century is no longer defined solely by national borders, but also by infrastructure such as roads, railways, ports, pipelines, and communication cables. In other words, the world is organized not only around sovereignty and territory, but also around flow, accessibility, and connectivity (Khanna, 2016).

This trend also changes the way we understand regionalism. Whereas regionalism was once viewed primarily as a political or institutional framework among neighboring states, today it is increasingly shaped by economic, technological, urban, civic, and cultural networks. A region is not merely a geographical space, but also a system of connections, interdependencies, and the capacity for joint action.

However, connectivity is not synonymous with integration. Infrastructure can connect countries, but it does not necessarily foster trust between societies; trade corridors can accelerate the movement of goods and capital, but they do not guarantee a sense of belonging, mutual recognition, or civic cooperation. Therefore, the central question is not merely whether regions are becoming more connected, but whether these connections can translate into social and civic regional cohesion.

B. Regional Momentum in the Middle East and North Africa

The MENA region is currently in the midst of a new wave of economic, infrastructural, and technological connectivity. A key driver of this is the accelerated economic development that has taken place in the Gulf region in recent years, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, driven by the need to diversify economies and reduce dependence on oil revenues through the development of sectors such as innovation, technology, and advanced infrastructure (Hertog, 2020; World Bank, 2022). Initiatives such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 reflect this shift and embody a broader approach to development based on economic openness, cross-border investment, and integration with global markets (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Oxford Business Group, 2025). Furthermore, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) serves as an example of a minilateral regional framework that has succeeded, to a relative extent, to promote economic and security integration, including the development of shared infrastructure such as the Gulf electricity grid (GCC Secretariat, 2022).

In addition, the energy sector continues to serve as a key driver of regional connectivity, but this sector is also undergoing change. MENA remains vital to global energy security, but is no longer viewed solely as a supplier of oil and gas; rather, it is gradually becoming a hub for renewable energy, green hydrogen, solar energy, and energy efficiency, thanks in part to the region’s abundant natural conditions and energy resources (International Energy Agency, 2023; International Renewable Energy Agency, 2024; World Bank, 2022). The energy transition is creating new opportunities for cooperation and reinforcing the understanding that climate, water, and energy challenges require joint regional action.

This regional momentum is also reflected in the establishment of new political and minilateral frameworks. The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 under U.S. auspices, initially involved the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, with Morocco and Sudan later joining the initiative through associated normalization agreements (U.S. Department of State, 2020; Singer, 2021). The agreements marked a turning point in relations between Israel and countries in the region, leading to the development of pragmatic cooperation in the fields of economy, innovation, technology, security, tourism, education, culture, and health (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020; Abraham Accords Peace Institute, 2023). Beyond their diplomatic significance,

Professor Eli Podeh suggests viewing the Abraham Accords as part of a new model of normalization in Israel-Arab relations, distinct from the “cold peace” that characterized relations with Egypt and Jordan, and aiming to include not only intergovernmental ties but also broader economic, cultural, and social dimensions (Podeh, 2022). However, it is important to note that the Abraham Accords were not welcomed by all states in the region and even sparked opposition. The war that broke out in October 2023 partially halted this momentum, particularly in civil-society cooperation.

Another relevant initiative is the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which is set to connect India, the Gulf states, the Middle East, and Europe through a network of ports, railways, trade routes, energy infrastructure, and communication cables. The corridor reflects a desire to ensure redundancy in trade routes – that is, to reduce dependence on bottlenecks and geostrategic barriers – and to transform MENA into a space that connects continents, markets, infrastructure, and people (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023; Atlantic Council, 2025).³ Unlike existing strategic passageways such as the Suez Canal, which are controlled exclusively by certain states, the concept underlying IMEC seeks to decentralize connectivity and distribute assets and infrastructure across a wider area. This concept was reflected in the remarks of Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, when he announced the corridor at the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023, where he emphasized the importance of physical, digital, and financial connectivity, and the corridor’s expected contribution to promoting economic integration between India and Europe (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023).

At the same time, there is also a noticeable increase in the European Union’s involvement in the Middle East and Mediterranean region. In recent years, the European Union has formulated a renewed strategy regarding the region, focusing on green and digital connectivity, investment in human capital, and strengthening cooperation on climate, employment, youth, and economic development (European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2025).

C. Past Attempts at Regional Integration: Why Were They Insufficient?

The current regional momentum does not exist in a historical vacuum. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, numerous attempts have been made to promote regionalism in MENA on the political, security, and economic fronts. Some of these initiatives arose from a desire for Arab or Islamic unity, others from security or geostrategic interests, and others from an attempt to create economic and institutional frameworks for cooperation and coordination. However, despite the multitude of initiatives, most have yielded limited results and failed to establish deep and stable regional integration (Fawcett, 2023; Del Sarto, 2017; Asseri & Ahmad, 2023). Notable initiatives include the Arab League, established in 1945; the Baghdad Pact, founded in 1955 and later becoming CENTO (Central Treaty Organization); the United Arab Republic, established in 1958 (and dissolved in 1961); the Arab Common Market, established in 1964; the Gulf Cooperation Council, established in 1981; the Arab Maghreb Union, established in 1989; the Arab Cooperation Council, established in the same year; the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, launched in 2004; the Union for the Mediterranean, established in 2008; and the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, established in 2019. Each of these initiatives reflected a different historical moment, a different set of priorities and a different conception of regional cooperation (Fawcett, 2023; Arab League, 1945; GCC Secretariat, 2022; WIPO, 1989; EEAS, n.d.; EMGF, n.d.).

However, a common thread can be identified in many of them: they were based primarily on agreements between states, leaders, and official institutions, and less on building a social foundation within and between civil societies. In many cases, they remained dependent on political shifts, rivalries between regimes, security

³ An example of the need for redundancy can be found in the round of military hostilities between the United States, Israel, and Iran that began in February 2026, bringing maritime trade to a halt at the entrance to and exit from the Strait of Hormuz after Iran blocked the strait as a bargaining chip and leverage during the war and during ceasefire negotiations. Another example is the Suez Canal: because the shipping lane there is relatively narrow, when a ship runs aground or becomes stuck for any other reason, maritime trade through the canal can be halted for days on end, causing severe economic damage and creating supply disruptions.

mistrust, ideological divides, and ongoing conflicts. When cooperation relies almost entirely on the political level, it becomes particularly vulnerable to crises, leadership changes, security escalations, or shifts in the balance of power (Del Sarto, 2017; Fawcett, 2023; Behr & Jokela, 2011).

This does not mean that these initiatives were without value. Some of them established important mechanisms, a regional language, institutional precedents or frameworks for cooperation in specific areas. However, they demonstrate that sustainable regionalism cannot be based solely on agreements between political leaders. For regionalism to become a deep and sustainable process, it must also permeate society: educational institutions, civil society organizations, local authorities, academia, professional networks, digital communities and spaces where people and organizations learn to work together (Hettne, 2005; Söderbaum, 2016; Acharya, 2012).

D. New Regionalism and the Need for Civic Connectivity

To understand the gap between infrastructure connectivity in the Middle East and the degree of civic integration in the region, one can draw on the “New Regionalism” approach, developed by Björn Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, among others. This approach seeks to broaden the understanding of regionalism beyond inter-state agreements and formal institutional frameworks. According to the approach, regionalism is a multidimensional social, political, economic and cultural process in which a geographic area may gradually evolve from a basic space of geographic proximity into a regional society or community with shared norms, institutions, trust, and identity (Hettne, 2005; Söderbaum, 2016).

Hettne and Söderbaum describe regionalism as a gradual developmental process, proposing five stages of development: the first stage is the existence of a regional space, defined as a basic geographical unit without substantive ties; in the second stage, a regional complex develops, in which interdependence arises around security and economic issues; the third stage is the formation of a regional society, in which cooperation becomes institutionalized and managed through established rules and organizations; in the fourth stage, a regional community takes shape, characterized by a shared identity and mutual trust that transcends narrow national interests; and in the fifth and most advanced stage, the region functions almost as a unified political entity on the international stage (Region State), a rare stage that does not characterize most regions in the world, and at most applies, only partially, to the European Union (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000; Hettne, 2005).⁴

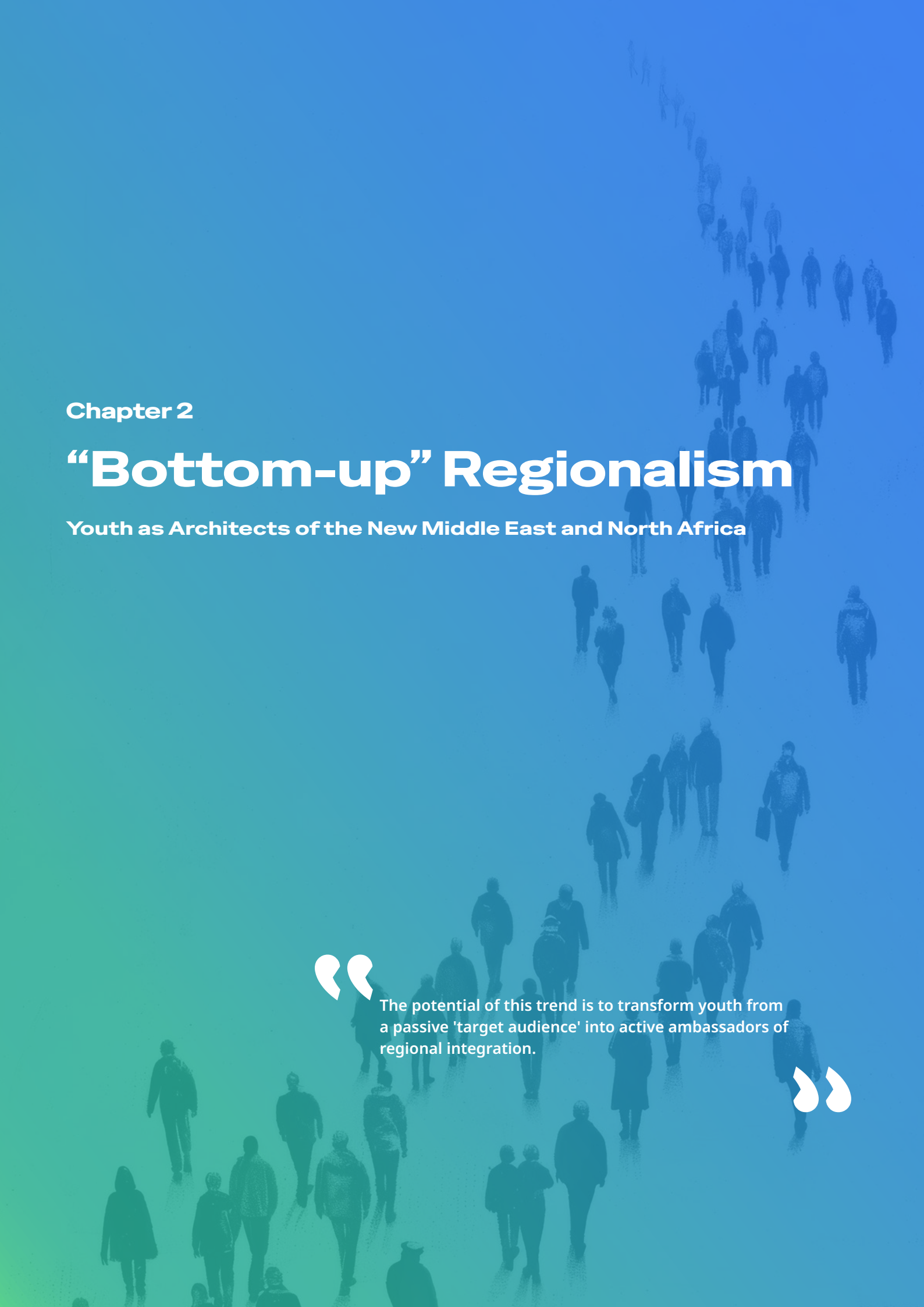
The central novelty of this approach is the shift from focusing on the state to focusing on society; from formal institutions to informal networks; and from an assumed cultural homogeneity to a recognition of multiple identities, interests, and actors. Regionalism, according to this view, is not merely the result of policy decisions, but also of cumulative social processes: professional collaborations, the mobility of people, knowledge exchange, inter-city connections, academia, entrepreneurship, culture, and civil society (Söderbaum, 2016; Acharya, 2012).

In the MENA context, this approach situates the region along a five-stage continuum of regionalism, as one currently occupying an intermediate stage: on the one hand, there is growing interdependence in the areas of security, the economy, energy, infrastructure, technology, and the environment; the countries of the region are not isolated from one another, and they are increasingly dependent on their ability to manage shared challenges. On the other hand, a broad civil infrastructure capable of supporting deep and stable integration has not yet taken shape. There are connections, but not always a sense of partnership; there are initiatives, but not always public legitimacy; there is connectivity, but it has not yet fully translated into civic regionalism (Fawcett, 2019; Bilgin, 2005).

4 The closest example of this is the European Union, although it does not fully embody this concept either. Europe/ the European Union is the most developed example of a regional framework that has progressed beyond economic and institutional cooperation toward a regional community with supranational institutions, a common legal system, a parliament, a common market, a common currency in some countries, and a certain degree of joint external action. However, even the European Union is not a full-fledged “region state,” because member states still retain significant national sovereignty, particularly in the areas of defense, foreign policy, and political identity.

This is the central challenge of the current regional momentum. It lies not only in creating additional agreements or infrastructure, but in the ability to transform this connectivity into a social, civic, and cultural experience. In other words, the question is not merely how to connect the Middle East through corridors, ports, railways, or energy, but how to connect the people, organizations, and communities – living and operating in this region (Khanna, 2016; Hettne, 2005).

This is where youth organizations and institutions come into play. They operate between the state and the individual, providing frameworks in which trust can be built, mechanisms for cooperation developed, tomorrow's leaders connected, and regional ideas translated into sustainable action. In so doing, they become a central mechanism for translating infrastructural and economic connectivity into civic regionalism. The next chapter will delve deeper into this concept and examine the “bottom-up” approach to regionalism as a framework for understanding the role of youth in shaping the new Middle East and North Africa region.

The background of the entire page is a high-angle, blue-tinted photograph of a large crowd of people walking away from the viewer. The people are silhouetted against the blue background, and their movement creates a strong sense of direction and flow, leading the eye towards the top right corner of the image.

Chapter 2

“Bottom-up” Regionalism

Youth as Architects of the New Middle East and North Africa

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The potential of this trend is to transform youth from a passive 'target audience' into active ambassadors of regional integration.

”

This chapter aims to offer a contemporary perspective on the changing role of youth in the regional context – from passive actors or an “issue” to active agents and influential strategic partners in peace processes and regional integration. The chapter consists of four sections: the first section establishes the theoretical framework, focusing on “Elicitive Peacebuilding” and Networked Society theories; the second section analyzes the growing international recognition of the role of youth in the fields of peace and security in recent years; the third part examines the development of the field of Youth Diplomacy and its expression in the regional and global spheres; and the final part addresses adaptive resilience and leadership as key to organizations’ ability to cope with challenges and ensure continuity. This combination seeks to highlight the role of youth as significant actors shaping the present and future of the region.

A. “Elicitive Peacebuilding” and the Networked Society

The role of youth in the region is based first and foremost on the approach of “Elicitive Peacebuilding,” which was first formulated by John Paul Lederach (1995). According to this approach, sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through external imposition by leaders or experts but must grow from the cultural and human resources found within the community itself. Lederach emphasizes that peacebuilding is a long-term social process based on the transformation of relationships, not merely on the signing of formal agreements.

The scholar Wolfgang Dietrich (2012) added an important conceptual and philosophical dimension to the “Elicitive Peacebuilding” approach in his three-volume trilogy titled *Many Peaces*. In these books, Dietrich argued that there is no single universal model of peace, but rather a set of “many peaces” – that is, diverse, local, and multidimensional conceptions of peace influenced by the unique cultural, religious, and historical context of each society. According to this approach, peace is not a static state but a living dynamic that changes according to the identities of the actors operating on the ground. He also emphasized that peace is not a “product” to be passed down to the next generation, but a potential to be rediscovered.

Dietrich views youth as key agents in implementing his approach to peace, which he calls “trans-rational” and is influenced not only by logic but also by emotional and cultural connections. In his view, youth are not merely passive “recipients of peace,” but rather, due to their cultural and identity flexibility, can recognize the multiplicity of “peaces” and draw solutions from their communities that rely not only on modern security concepts, but also on a deep emotional and cultural connection to the region. This ability fosters a sense of belonging and mission among them, which generates deep inner resilience and strengthens youth’s commitment to the region.

Network Theory provides a complementary layer to understanding the role of youth in the 21st century. Manuel Castells characterizes the current era as a “Network Society,” in which political power is shifting from rigid, hierarchical structures toward flexible, horizontal networks (Castells, 2010). For youth in MENA, the network is not merely a technological tool but an infrastructure for cross-border action. Their ability to leverage “weak ties” – a concept coined by Mark Granovetter to describe connections with actors outside one’s close social circles – enables the flow of knowledge, innovation, and regional solidarity outside traditional state control mechanisms (Granovetter, 1973).

This combination of “Elicitive Peacebuilding” and networked action is presented in *Youth and Sustainable Peacebuilding*, a book by Berents, Bolten, and McEvoy-Levy (2024). The authors emphasize that building sustainable peace requires a shift from “formal inclusion” within existing government-supervised institutions – a process that can often limit the creativity of the younger generation – to independent action led by the youth themselves. According to the authors, youth are not merely passive “partners,” but agents with agency, who serve as “norm entrepreneurs” and are even capable of creating new norms of political communication that are less hierarchical and more networked, taking place outside of institutional structures and focused on shared regional and global challenges.

In doing so, they challenge the narrative that views youth as an “issue” or “challenge,” and instead offer a critical framework that distinguishes between institutionalized participation and the collective construction of peace

on the ground. The study also indicates that traditional metrics used to evaluate peace agreements are unable to measure the profound and lasting change that youth are bringing about through social solidarity and daily civic action, which constitute the true foundation for regional stability. Thus, youth emerge as catalysts and architects of regional integration, capable of shaping the future of MENA, if only their countries would grant them the necessary space to act.

B. Growing international recognition and UN Security Council Resolution 2250

On December 9, 2015, UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on “Youth, Peace, and Security” (UNSCR 2250) was unanimously adopted. This resolution is considered historic, as it marks the first time the Security Council has dedicated an entire resolution to the positive and essential role of youth and youth movements in maintaining global peace and security, thereby signaling the younger generation’s transition from a group excluded from positions of power to a strategic partner in shaping policy and security. This trend, known as the “Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Agenda,” seeks to challenge the traditional view that sees youth as a passive group or, alternatively, as a threat to stability that must be managed.

Resolution 2250 did not emerge in a vacuum. It was the result of a strategic diplomatic effort that took shape at the height of the regional struggle against radicalization and violence. Its adoption took place against the backdrop of youth’s disappointment with the outcomes of the “Arab Spring,” the rise of ISIS and its extensive efforts to recruit youth into its ranks, as well as the worsening refugee crisis in Syria and Iraq. The historic turning point came in April 2015, when the Jordanian Crown Prince, Prince Hussein bin Abdullah – who was only 20 at the time – became the youngest person ever to preside over a Security Council meeting. In his seminal speech, the prince laid the groundwork for a shift in global perception when he said that youth are not “a marginalised group, but rather a targeted group. They are targeted for their huge potential, self-confidence and ability to change the world” (United Nations, April 2015). The personal leadership of a young figure at the heart of the international establishment lent moral and symbolic validity to the demand to integrate the younger generation into decision-making processes..

Jordan’s initiative continued in August 2015, when the Kingdom hosted the “Global Forum on Youth, Peace, and Security” in Amman. At this forum, the “Amman Youth Declaration” was formulated, a document drafted by thousands of youth from around the world that served as the conceptual basis for the draft resolution (ICIP, 2016). Jordan played a significant role as the initiator of the draft resolution in the Security Council and succeeded in rallying a coalition of civil society organizations such as UNOY (United Network of Young Peacebuilders) and member states. This effort culminated in the resolution’s adoption in December, establishing five strategic pillars – participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and rehabilitation – that define the role of youth as influential agents of peace (Berents & Geyer, 2022).

C. “Youth Diplomacy” as a Global Trend

Alongside growing institutional recognition, a new trend known as “Youth Diplomacy” has emerged over the past decade, redefining the role of youth in international relations (UNDP, 2019). To understand the depth of this change, Youth Diplomacy should be viewed as a central branch of “New Public Diplomacy,” a concept identified by scholars such as Jan Melissen (2005). While traditional diplomacy has focused on hierarchical communication between governments (G2G), New Public Diplomacy emphasizes the importance of multidimensional communication networks between societies and peoples (P2P). Thus, youth diplomacy serves as a means of “soft power,” with youth functioning as unofficial diplomats. As Andrew Hodges and Fabian Geyer (2018) noted, this trend involves deliberate and organized engagement in international discourse and peacebuilding, ranging from official delegations to cross-border civic initiatives in the fields of climate, innovation, and culture, enabling the cultivation of mutual understanding and interests and the creation of deep connections between societies.

This recognition of the active role played by youth is clearly reflected in the remarks of Abu Rumman, who served as Jordan's Minister of Youth at the time of the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250. Abu Rumman analyzes the Jordanian experience and argues that the shift from viewing youth as a security threat to viewing them as strategic partners is a necessary condition for regional stability. According to Abu Rumman, including youth in decision-making centers is not only a democratic step but also a tool for preventing radicalization and building social resilience based on a sense of mission and shared responsibility for the region's future (Abu Rumman, 2021).

The concept of "youth diplomacy" has been adopted on the global stage and reflects institutional recognition of the added value that youth bring as a bridge between civic values and foreign policy. The European Union, for example, institutionalized the concept through the "EU Youth Diplomacy Network," officially stating that youth diplomacy is a central pillar of our strategy for building resilient societies and promoting European values around the world (EEAS, 2021). Similarly, at the G20 forum, the concept is used to grant *de facto* authority to youth to shape the global economic agenda. As stated at the Italy Summit, the Y20 platform enables youth diplomacy to influence the management of the global economy and ensure that the voice of the next generation is integrated into decision-making processes (Y20, 2021). Within the framework of NATO, the concept is also mentioned as part of the need to strengthen democratic resilience; the organization's Secretary General emphasized that youth diplomacy is essential to the alliance, as it bridges the gap between military strategy and civic values (NATO, 2022).

In the Middle East and North Africa, the concept has been adopted as part of countries' efforts to project "soft power" and modernity. The United Arab Emirates has led this trend with the launch of the "Youth Diplomacy Program," aiming to empower a generation of young diplomats who will represent the country's values of tolerance and partnership on the global stage (WAM, 2019). In parallel, the "Arab Youth Center" is working to institutionalize the concept at the pan-Arab level through leadership programs that aim to make youth diplomacy an integral part of foreign policy in the region (AYC, 2021). In the Kingdom of Jordan, the pioneer in this field, the concept also serves as a strategic anchor for preventing radicalization and building regional peace (Jordan MFA, 2021). This combination of language and function illustrates how diplomacy is shifting from the exclusive domain of experts to a space of intergenerational partnership.

The fundamental difference between this model and traditional diplomacy lies in the identity of the actors and the nature of communication. While classical diplomacy is conducted at official and hierarchical levels, youth diplomacy is networked and flexible. It relies on digital literacy and global values that enable the creation of human connections that bypass rigid political and bureaucratic barriers. As Oliver Richmond (2019) argues, the uniqueness of this diplomacy lies in a "new agency" that is not bound by the narratives of previous generations, enabling direct, pragmatic, and unmediated interaction between societies.

The potential of this trend is to transform youth from a passive "target audience" into active ambassadors of regional integration. As Richmond and Visoka argue (2019), this engagement has the potential to alter the dynamics of ongoing conflict by building trust at the grassroots level and creating a foundation for partnership that is resilient to political upheavals. However, bringing this potential to fruition has significant structural barriers. Kabbani points to a deep divide in the Middle East between "individual agency" and "institutional infrastructure": while the younger generation is characterized by high levels of technological and values-based literacy, the region's organizational and economic structures remain largely outdated and rigid. Without an enabling organizational infrastructure – including the opening of civic spaces and institutional reforms – youth initiatives may remain sporadic and limited in their impact (Kabbani, 2019). This insight reinforces the need to distinguish between the inherent capabilities of Generation Z and the necessity of building supportive institutional networks that can realize the potential for sustainable regional change.

However, the success of youth diplomacy in the Middle East also depends on youth's ability to adapt to and navigate the region's challenges.

D. Adaptive Resilience and Leadership

The ability of youth organizations in the MENA region to maintain operational continuity amid conflict and political volatility depends on the development of *adaptive resilience*. The need for this model is amplified by the characteristics of the 21st century, often described as the “VUCA world” – a term coined by the U.S. Army War College after the end of the Cold War to describe the new global reality of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. While systemic change once unfolded over generations, Bennett and Lemoine argue that in today’s VUCA world, the accelerating pace of technological and geopolitical change requires change agents to develop the capacity to respond and adapt rapidly in order to survive. In contrast to the classical conception of resilience as “bouncing back,” the concept of adaptive resilience defines a system’s ability to learn and change in response to the stressors themselves (Heifetz, 1994). Comfort, Boin, and Demchak (2010) expand on this concept, arguing that in governmental and international systems facing crises, resilience is built through the redesign of organizational structures that enable rapid learning. Walker et al. (2014) add that adaptive resilience in complex systems is not expressed through passive endurance, but rather through the ability to adapt the strategy of action to changing circumstances while maintaining core functions. For young leaders in the region, this resilience manifests itself in “under-the-radar” practices or the creative use of technology to circumvent physical barriers.

This model of resilience is integrated into Ronald Heifetz’s theory of Adaptive Leadership (1994), which distinguishes between “technical challenges” – for which there are known solutions based on existing authority – and adaptive challenges. Such challenges require leadership to drive profound change in the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the parties involved – a necessary process when reality no longer allows for the use of familiar tools. Joiner and Josephs (2017) link this to the concept of “Leadership Agility” and emphasize that 21st-century leaders must operate at varying levels of agility to anticipate and manage change within VUCA environments.

Young leaders in the Middle East operate in a changing landscape that demands adaptability; these organizations are not merely addressing logistical challenges but are driving a paradigm shift in perceptions of the ‘Other’, and in the possibility of regional partnership at the heart of the conflict. Navigating VUCA challenges requires adopting strategies that balance bold vision with tactical caution, while identifying social red lines and operating cautiously within their boundaries (Heifetz, 1994). Developing this kind of resilience and leadership can enable organizations to become independent actors, capable of ensuring the continuity of their work and establishing stable networks of trust over time.

Chapter 3

The Youth Ecosystem in the Middle East and North Africa

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The region's central challenge is not a lack of initiative – but rather the absence of an overarching regional infrastructure that would enable initiatives to translate into systemic impact.

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The youth ecosystem in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is characterized by a complex mix of demographic, economic, political, and social factors. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on five key aspects: (1) the demographic and social-economic dynamics of the youth population, including education and employment; (2) mapping the key actors operating in the region; (3) the main arenas of action; (4) a quantitative analysis of youth organizations; and (5) the challenges preventing youth from fully realizing the potential of regional cooperation. Combining these aspects allows for an analysis of the ecosystem as a multidimensional regional structure with limited connectivity, in which the multitude of actors and arenas of action does not converge into regional integration, but is expressed primarily through localized activities with limited impact.

A. The Youth Population: Demographics, Gender, Education, and Employment

The demographic dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa are key to understanding the regional momentum. While Europe is contending with an aging population, the Middle East and North Africa are characterized by a phenomenon known as the “youth bulge.” This refers to a state in which the percentage of youth in the population is exceptionally high relative to other age groups. On the one hand, this phenomenon creates potential for economic and social growth, but on the other hand, it places significant pressure on the labor market, the education system, and social services.⁵ As of 2023, the region's youth population, aged 15–29, numbered approximately 165 million – representing 25% of its total population (World Bank, 2023).⁶ The proportion is even higher in some countries, such as Syria, where youth account for about 33%, Sudan (29%) and Jordan (27%), compared to 17% in Cyprus. The variation in the proportion of youth across the region's countries reflects the fact that the Middle East and North Africa are not a monolithic bloc. The annual growth rate of the 15–29 age group in the region has hovered around 1.5%–2% over the past decade, compared to only about 1% in OECD countries. In Iraq and Sudan, the growth rate is even higher than 2.5% per year (UN DESA, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

In terms of gender, the weighted regional distribution stands at approximately 52% young men compared to approximately 48% young women, a figure that reflects the situation in a significant portion of the region's countries. However, there is a sharp bias in favor of men in the Gulf states, with the proportion of women among youth standing at about 37% in the United Arab Emirates and Oman, and only 29% in Qatar (World Bank, 2023). This skew is not the result of natural population growth but rather of the structure of the labor market, which relies primarily on the hiring of young male migrant workers.

In terms of the distribution of the youth population, the region is undergoing rapid urbanization, with over 65% of youth currently living in urban areas; in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, this figure exceeds 80%. However, in North African countries and more developed nations, a significant portion of youth still reside in rural peripheries, where access to services and infrastructure is lower (UN-Habitat, 2020; World Bank, 2023). This gap between urban centers and rural areas deepens inequality of opportunity and influences patterns of social mobility.

⁵ The term “youth bulge” generally refers to people aged 15–29.

⁶ This data refers to the 25 countries included in the study population, as listed in the “Introduction and Methodology” section.

Table 1: Percentage of youth aged 15–29 in the Middle East (World Bank)⁷

Num	Country Name	TOTAL YOUTH	Total Population	% of Youth
1	Syrian Arab Republic	8,137,612	24,672,760	33%
2	South Sudan	3,516,219	11,943,408	29%
3	Sudan	14,403,001	50,448,963	29%
4	Djibouti	329,137	1,168,722	28%
5	Iraq	12,879,944	46,042,015	28%
6	Yemen, Rep.	11,115,752	40,583,164	27%
7	West Bank and Gaza	1,445,714	5,289,152	27%
8	Mauritania	1,410,307	5,169,395	27%
9	Jordan	3,110,701	11,552,876	27%
10	United Arab Emirates	2,868,009	10,986,400	26%
11	Egypt, Arab Rep.	29,464,289	116,538,258	25%
12	Saudi Arabia	8,783,412	35,300,280	25%
13	Libya	1,831,458	7,381,023	25%
14	Lebanon	1,416,542	5,805,962	24%
15	Oman	1,275,152	5,281,538	24%
16	Morocco	8,984,472	38,081,173	24%
17	Turkiye	19,294,521	85,518,661	23%
18	Israel	2,225,923	9,974,400	22%
19	Bahrain	336,508	1,588,670	21%
20	Qatar	591,657	2,857,822	21%
21	Tunisia	2,524,902	12,277,109	21%
22	Algeria	9,604,830	46,814,308	21%
23	Iran, Islamic Rep.	18,344,032	91,567,738	20%
24	Kuwait	945,274	4,897,263	19%
25	Cyprus	232,938	1,358,282	17%
Total in MENA		165,072,306	673,099,342	25%

⁷ Data source: World Bank Group, World Development Indicators. These data are based, among other sources, on processed data from the United Nations Population Division and are widely regarded as a standard reference for cross-national comparative analysis.

In terms of employment, youth unemployment rates in the region among those aged 15–24 are among the highest in the world, averaging between 20% and 30% in 2023, compared to just 13% globally. Labor force participation rates are relatively low, particularly among young women. One of the most notable indicators of this is the rate of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET), which is 34% at the regional level, reaching 44.2% among young women (ILO, 2024). At the same time, the labor market is characterized by high levels of informal employment, concentration in the public sector, and dependence on low-productivity service sectors, limiting the capacity to generate quality jobs at the scale required by demographic growth. Furthermore, recent decades have seen a significant increase in access to higher education, and in many countries, women have surpassed men in educational attainment. However, this trend has not been accompanied by the creation of a corresponding supply of jobs, leading to a persistent mismatch between skills and opportunities and underemployment (ILO, 2024).

The gap between education and employment is also caused by the composition of youth's fields of study in the region, which indicates a mismatch between academic preferences and the needs of the labor market. According to UNESCO data, approximately 30%–35% of students study STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, while about 40% choose humanities and social sciences. At the same time, the proportion of students enrolled in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs remains relatively low, at about 10%–15% (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2018). As a result, a significant proportion of educated youth are employed in roles that do not match their training, a phenomenon that undermines economic productivity and personal motivation. Accordingly, over 60% of youth in the region report job insecurity (ILO, 2024), reflecting a system that fails to provide a stable outlook for growth or entrepreneurship. According to a survey by ASDA'A BCW, over 50% of youth express a desire to emigrate or work outside their home country. In Lebanon, Tunisia and Egypt there has been a significant increase in the out-migration of educated youth in recent years, a trend that is causing a brain drain and undermining regional growth potential (UNDP, 2023; IOM, 2022).⁸

B. Key Actors: National, Regional, International, and Civil Society

The youth ecosystem in the Middle East and North Africa consists of a variety of actors operating in parallel and within different spheres of influence. For the purposes of this analysis, four main levels can be identified that reflect a multi-level governance structure, in which responsibilities, resources, and authorities are distributed across different levels but are not necessarily coordinated among them. This division reflects a network of interactions and mutual influence among the actors.

The national level includes government ministries and national agencies responsible for youth affairs, reflecting the centrality of this issue on the public agenda. Examples of this can be found in Jordan (Ministry of Youth), Morocco (Ministry of Youth, Culture, and Communication), and the United Arab Emirates (General Authority of Youth and Sports Welfare). These bodies are responsible for policy formulation, resource allocation, and the initiation of programs in the areas of youth leadership, vocational training, and civic engagement. In addition, they serve as intermediaries between the state, the community, and the international system, and provide formal frameworks for action and cooperation (ESCWA, 2020; UNDP, 2021).

The regional and minilateral level encompasses both broad regional frameworks and focused minilateral coalitions.⁹ These actors work to promote practical cooperation, sometimes partially circumventing broad

8 The ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey is one of the most comprehensive public opinion surveys of young people in the Arab world, conducted annually by ASDA'A BCW, part of the Burson Cohn & Wolfe (BCW) group. The survey is based on thousands of face-to-face interviews with young people aged 18–24 in approximately 18 countries across the Middle East and North Africa.

9 One of the earliest references to the concept of minilateralism appears in the work of Miles Kahler (1992), who highlighted the advantages of smaller forums in promoting effective coordination. This approach is nowadays seen as a pragmatic alternative to broad multilateralism, particularly against the backdrop of political polarization and the difficulty of reaching broad agreements.

political barriers, and are characterized by relative institutional flexibility. Examples include the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – an intergovernmental regional framework uniting the Gulf states and working to promote economic integration, policy coordination, and regional cooperation, including initiatives in education, employment, and youth empowerment; the Union for the Mediterranean – an intergovernmental platform connecting European and Southern Mediterranean countries, promoting projects related to economic development, sustainability, and human capital, with an emphasis on cross-border cooperation; ICESCO – an intergovernmental organization operating within the Islamic world, focused on promoting education, science, and culture, and serving as a platform for human capital development and youth empowerment initiatives;¹⁰ The Arab Youth Center, established in 2017 in Abu Dhabi and serving as a network of youth from Arab countries. In parallel, the “Abraham Accords” signed in 2020 constitute a minilateral initiative, and although the agreements themselves do not provide a framework for youth activities, they have created a political environment that enables a proliferation of new civil and minilateral initiatives in which youth can participate. However, the flexible nature of these frameworks, which often operate on an ad hoc basis, means that many of the initiatives do not coalesce into a stable regional institutional infrastructure.

The multilateral and international level includes intergovernmental actors that provide research and financial infrastructure, as well as mechanisms for youth-related activities. These actors include UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO) as well as the European Union, which promote programs for leadership development, education, and sustainability. Additionally, financial institutions and international organizations (such as the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, and the ILO) provide economic analyses and help fund initiatives and reforms in areas affecting youth.¹¹ This level plays a central role in creating standards, knowledge, and resources, but it typically operates “top-down” and is sometimes detached from the local context. This gap between global policy-making and local implementation sometimes creates tension between the global normative discourse and the capacity for adaptation and practical implementation at the local level.

The civic and cross-border networks level includes NGOs, youth organizations, community initiatives and social enterprises, and constitutes the most dynamic and flexible layer of the youth ecosystem. These actors often operate in areas where the state struggles to intervene, enabling youth to be directly involved in developing solutions in social, educational, and economic spheres. Within this level, three main configurations can be identified: First, civil society organizations and local and regional youth initiatives that work to promote education, entrepreneurship, and social engagement, often in collaboration with public and private entities. Second, regional network-based platforms that connect youth from different countries across entrepreneurship, employment, and training. An example is the INJAZ Al-Arab network, which operates in more than ten countries and promotes entrepreneurship education by linking education systems, the private sector, and volunteers. Third, cross-border professional networks, which sometimes operate outside formal frameworks and are based on professional or academic affiliation. These networks enable the circumvention of state barriers and the establishment of informal infrastructures for regional cooperation. One example is the International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations (IFMSA), which connects medical students

¹⁰ Formally known as the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. In 2023, the organization launched the “Year of Youth” as part of a multinational strategy to transform young people into leaders in the fields of technology, green entrepreneurship, and peacebuilding. For more information, see: Year of Youth: Launching a new era of youth empowerment and leadership (ICESCO, 2023).

¹¹ <https://www.arabou.edu.kw>

The Association of Arab Universities is a regional umbrella organization that brings together institutions of higher education from Arab countries. Its primary objectives are to promote academic cooperation, facilitate coordination among universities, ensure mutual recognition of institutions and degrees, and organize professional conferences and forums. For more information, visit the official website: <https://www.aaru.edu.jo>

worldwide, including in the Eastern Mediterranean region.¹² In addition, it is worth mentioning regional networks such as WeAreMENA, which brings together youth organizations from the Middle East and promotes cooperation in education and social issues.

This breakdown highlights that the region's youth ecosystem is not based on a single institutional hierarchy, but rather on a multilayered system of interdependence, interaction, and overlap among different levels of actors, which shapes a complex, networked, and nonlinear regional dynamic.

C. Key Spheres of Operation

This section presents six key spheres in which young men and women are active in the Middle East and North Africa. This selection is partial and does not represent all spheres of activity; rather, it is intended for analytical purposes and to illustrate both the complexity and the richness of the ecosystem.

The first sphere is **education and vocational training**, serving as a key platform for integrating youth into society and the economy. This area encompasses the development of technological skills, vocational training and access to higher education, and has been developed largely in response to high youth unemployment rates in the region (ILO, 2022; OECD, 2018). In parallel, education and training institutions have increasingly become spaces for civic entrepreneurship and community engagement in recent years. In Morocco, for example, programs run by the OCP Foundation in partnership with UNICEF combine vocational training with the development of social entrepreneurship skills among youth in peripheral areas, particularly in the southern regions of the country. In Jordan, programs under the Edu Syria Initiative¹³ work to integrate young Syrians and Jordanians into technological and community-based training tracks, with an emphasis on strengthening social integration alongside employability skills (UNICEF, 2019; UNDP, 2021).

The second sphere is **academia**, which serves as a central arena for the creation of knowledge, the shaping of identity, and the formation of social perceptions. Alongside its traditional role as a driver of scientific collaboration, mobility and innovation, academia is characterized as a relatively open space, holding unique potential for developing cross-border partnerships among institutions, researchers, and students. Examples include the Erasmus+ program, which facilitates student and researcher exchanges between universities in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia and institutions in Europe, thereby creating spaces of exposure that influence youth's worldviews and regional identities. In parallel, Middle Eastern academic frameworks such as the Arab Open University¹⁴ and the Association of Arab Universities¹⁵ focus primarily on academic conferences, professional forums, and processes of mutual recognition among institutions and degrees, and less on student and researcher exchanges. Some of these frameworks even coalesce around a narrow ethnic or regional identity, thereby missing out on the potential inherent in regional diversity.

At the same time, academia can serve as a meeting point for multiple or even conflicting narratives and

12 The International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA) is an international federation of medical student associations, operating in more than 130 countries around the world. The organization is structured into global regions, including the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which encompasses countries in the Middle East and North Africa. For more information, see: International Federation of Medical Students' Associations.

13 A humanitarian educational scholarship program funded by the European Union, which operates through universities and international and local organizations, and provides scholarships for academic studies, vocational training, and the development of employability skills. For more information, see: <https://edu-syria.eu/>

14 The Arab Open University is a regional university operating in several countries in the Middle East. It is based on a model of open, multi-campus higher education, which provides access to flexible academic programs across multiple countries simultaneously. For more information, visit the official website: <https://www.arabou.edu.kw>

15 The Association of Arab Universities is a regional umbrella organization that brings together institutions of higher education from Arab countries. Its primary objectives are to promote academic cooperation, facilitate coordination among universities, ensure mutual recognition of institutions and degrees, and organize professional conferences and forums. For more information, visit the official website: <https://www.aaru.edu.jo>

ideologically charged public debates. In this context, the outbreak of the Israel– Hamas war in October 2023 resonated strongly across academic spaces worldwide, particularly on university campuses in the United States. It highlighted how campuses have increasingly become arenas for public debate, while also exposing deep polarization and, at times, expressions of racism and hatred between different groups (Brown, 2024). In this sense, academia is not a neutral space, but an arena that depends largely on how it is managed and shaped: when it is maintained as a safe and structured space for dialogue, it can serve as a central platform for forging connections, building trust, and deepening cross-border academic partnerships. However, when these conditions are absent, academia risks becoming a space where divisions deepen, competing narratives are oversimplified and intensified, and trust progressively erodes. Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need to strengthen inclusive and dynamic regional academic frameworks that promote cross-border mobility and may transform its potential into sustainable collaborations.

The third sphere is **civic and political engagement**. Youth are active through formal frameworks, social organizations and youth movements, with the aim of promoting rights, transparency, public services, and building trust between communities (CIVICUS, 2020; Arab Barometer, 2021). In this sphere, one can identify a variety of mechanisms that simulate decision-making processes, serving as an intermediary space between the state and civil society. In Jordan, for example, the “Jordan Youth Parliament” operates as a platform that simulates legislative procedures and enables youth to participate in public debates, develop skills, and gain exposure to decision-making processes at the national level. In the United Arab Emirates, Youth Councils operate under the UAE Federal Youth Authority, serving as a space for integrating youth into national strategic thinking and public policy development. At the regional level, the Regional Organization for Peace, Economics & Security (ROPES) connects mid-level leaders from the region and promotes regional leadership programs; and in Tunisia, Youth Policy Labs programs are held to encourage youth’s participation in shaping local public policy (Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs, Jordan, 2023; UAE Federal Youth Authority, 2024; Ministry of Youth and Sports, Egypt, 2023; UNDP Tunisia, 2022).

The fourth sphere is **environmental activism**, which has been gaining momentum in recent years as one of the most prominent arenas for cross-border action. Youth are acting on issues of climate change, sustainability, and resource management, both at the local level and as part of regional and global networks (UNICEF, 2019; UNDP, 2021). For example, the “Arab Youth Climate Movement” network brings together young activists from MENA and works to promote regional climate policy and connect existing initiatives across several countries in the region, with Morocco, Egypt and Lebanon serving as prominent hubs of youth activity in this field (AYCM, n.d.). Another example is EcoPeace Middle East, a regional organization established in 1994 that promotes cooperation on cross-border issues with a focus on water, renewable energy, agriculture, and sustainable development. The idea underlying its work is that environmental issues serve as a bridge for dialogue and discourse between countries, organizations, and people, alongside the view that the climate crisis presents not only risks but also opportunities for cooperation. The organization has offices in Tel Aviv, Ramallah and Amman, and its teams work together to achieve their shared goals. The organization runs educational programs for youth and educators and facilitates meetings between young Israelis, Jordanians, and Palestinians.

The fifth sphere is **innovation and entrepreneurship**, combining technological excellence with the development of young leadership. This sphere reflects a dynamic and growing ecosystem with the potential to become a key driver of regional connectivity and integration. In the Gulf region, the flagship programs of the Riyadh-based Misk Foundation offer youth boot camps and prestigious scholarships in collaboration with global academic institutions, while in Abu Dhabi, the Hub71 organization runs incentive programs aimed at attracting young entrepreneurs to establish deep-tech companies in the UAE. At the same time, regional accelerator programs such as Flat6Labs in Egypt and Jordan, and platforms like Wamda in Dubai and Amman, provide a support framework from the concept stage through to initial capital raising, connecting participants to a regional network of mentors. In parallel, there are programs to promote entrepreneurship as early as ages 15–18, aiming to reduce social and economic disparities. For example, the INJAZ Al-Arab network, which operates in 13 countries in the region, runs school programs that simulate the process of starting a company.

In Israel, the Peres Center for Peace and Innovation positions innovation as a platform for building trust, inclusion, and civic cooperation in the Israeli, Palestinian and regional spheres. The Center runs cross-border initiatives and programs for youth in the fields of innovation, entrepreneurship, civic leadership, sports, journalism, and collaboration among youth from diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. The goal of these programs is to expand access to educational and employment opportunities, foster young leadership, and create spaces for engagement based on shared interests and challenges.

The sixth sphere is **culture and creative expression**, encompassing art, music, film, and cultural and community initiatives. This sphere serves as a hub for identity formation and social expression, particularly in cities, while simultaneously functioning as a developing economic infrastructure for youth. In recent years, cultural industries based on creativity, media, and digital content have taken shape, becoming an integral part of the cultural economy in the region. This trend is reflected, among other things, in “Salam Forum”, which takes place in ten different cities across Morocco and combines live performances, a traveling cultural exhibition, and digital platforms. This initiative receives national and international exposure, enabling youth to express themselves personally while participating in a cross-border cultural dialogue. A community of creators and professionals is developing around this space, shaping an innovative professional infrastructure in the cultural sphere (Alkhabar60, 2026). Beyond that, culture functions as a space for long-term and sustainable change, particularly in the Middle East. Unlike more direct spheres of action, such as the political or social activism sphere, it enables a shift in consciousness and emotion that is not based on confrontation, but on gradual processes of exposure and emotional identification. This change occurs through the creation and permeation of representations and narratives, which enable a reworking of social perceptions and beliefs. Culture thus constitutes not only a space for expression, but also a space for gradual and ongoing social transformation.

D. Quantitative Analysis of Youth Organizations

This section presents a quantitative analysis based on a standardized comparative mapping of 125 youth organizations in the Middle East and North Africa. The mapping includes five leading organizations from each of the 26 countries included in the study. The analysis shows that most organizations, approximately 77% (96 out of 125), are non-governmental civil society organizations (NGOs), while 12% are affiliated with the government to some extent and 3% operate as social enterprises. These figures point to a broad civil society movement operating outside or alongside official state institutions, indicating the existence of an active and dynamic civil society.

The findings also show that approximately 60% of the organizations (75 of them) are youth-led, and about 6% have a dedicated branch or department focused on youth. In terms of target audience, about 64% of the organizations cater to youth in general, 13% focus on at-risk youth or vulnerable groups, 10% on young leaders and activists, 6% on students, and 4% on young entrepreneurs. This distribution indicates that the ecosystem does not focus solely on young elites or outstanding leaders, but primarily targets a broad audience of youth, while simultaneously nurturing target groups such as at-risk youth, young leaders, students, and entrepreneurs.

Out of all mapped organizations, 46% were classified as having a clear orientation toward cross-border collaboration, and an additional 10% as occasionally engaging in such activities. In practice, however, 67% of organizations operate at the national level only, while 19% operate at the regional MENA level. In other words, the potential for cooperation is greater than the actual scope of regional activity.

An analysis of the online mapping questionnaire and interviews reveals a series of barriers that hinder the realization of this potential, chief among them restrictions on movement, difficulties in obtaining visas, digital surveillance, and security sensitivities. Organizations report that regional conflicts often prevent face-to-face communication, necessitating subtle diplomacy and the protection of activists’ safety through “quiet operations.” For example, the EcoPeace organization emphasized that the conflict restricts travel and prevents physical meetings between colleagues, forcing a shift to continuous digital communication. Similarly, the

Mimouna organization from Morocco highlighted the paramount importance of being able to protect the safety of their partners in the sensitive political environment.

In terms of the main areas of focus for youth organizations, there is a clear preference for empowerment and capacity building over the provision of social services. Thus, 30% of the organizations (37 out of 125) focus on education and skills development, which are the top priority. In second and third place are political engagement (15%) and peacebuilding, dialogue and reconciliation (14%). In contrast, only 9% of the organizations – 11 in total – focus on providing social services as their primary area of focus. These figures may reflect not only the priorities of the organizations themselves, but also the preferences of funding bodies, which tend to support the areas of education, leadership, dialogue, and skills development.

Furthermore, an analysis of funding sources indicates a significant reliance on institutional sources: of all identified funding sources, 37% come from international institutions and 33% from local government bodies. In contrast, independent and private sources account for a much lower proportion: self-funding 12%, private philanthropy 11%, and corporate support only 6%.

The findings of the mapping exercise paint a picture of a young, active, and multi-sphere civic ecosystem that serves as a social pioneer amid significant uncertainty. Although it faces restrictions on movement, financial dependence and political barriers, it continues to create channels for action, knowledge, and collaboration that seek to shape a more stable, inclusive, and tolerant regional space.

E. Challenges for Youth Cooperation in the Middle East and North Africa

Despite the potential for cross-border collaboration among youth, there are several challenges and barriers that affect its ability to reach fruition. This section offers an analysis of these challenges by distinguishing between broad structural barriers and operational barriers.

At the structural level, one of the key challenges is the **lack of a cohesive sense of regional belonging**. Unlike other regions of the world, the Middle East is not characterized by a stable collective regional identity. Many youth oscillate between subnational identities and a global-digital identity yet struggle to develop a meaningful regional connection (Barnett, 1998; Phillips, 2014). Education systems continue to emphasize postcolonial national narratives, and at times even the “othering” of neighbors, while past attempts at regional integration have contributed to cynicism toward ideas of regional unity. In the absence of a shared sense of regional belonging, cooperation tends to be instrumental and short-term (Podeh, 2026).

Another structural barrier relates to **restrictions on movement and geopolitical divisions**. Strict and cumbersome visa procedures, political barriers and limited transportation infrastructure significantly restrict regional mobility, and in some cases make it impossible for many youth. These restrictions also reflect processes of “securitization,” in which cross-border organizing is sometimes perceived as a threat to regime stability (Khatib, 2013), thereby limiting the possibility of physical encounters, which are a fundamental prerequisite for building trust and creating stable regional networks. Consequently, despite high potential for regional connectivity, actual mobility remains limited, directly contributing to the fragmentation of the region's youth ecosystem.

The cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic complexity of the region poses an additional challenge to cross-border cooperation. The Middle East and North Africa are a complex, multi-layered region comprising various sub-regions – the Gulf, the Levant and North Africa – each with its own distinct history, social structure, political culture and patterns of behavior. In addition to being the birthplace of the major monotheistic religions, the region is characterized by a multitude of languages, dialects, ethnic groups, religious communities, national identities, and historical memories.

This complexity creates significant potential for cross-border encounters, learning and regional creativity, but also gives rise to misunderstandings, sensitivities, stereotypes and mistrust among youth and organizations from different countries and subregions. The linguistic gaps – between literary Arabic, local dialects, Hebrew,

Persian, Turkish, Tamazight, French, English, and other languages – are not merely a translation challenge, but often reflect social hierarchies, colonial legacies, political identities and barriers to participation. In the absence of sufficient regional literacy, cross-border collaborations may encounter cultural translation difficulties, misunderstandings, gaps in expectations, and challenges in establishing a common language. Therefore, developing intercultural learning skills, understanding the diverse Middle Eastern region, and the ability to act sensitively within a multi-identity reality are fundamental prerequisites for building sustainable regional collaborations.

Concurrently, the reality of **“Waithood”** – the postponement of the transition to economic and social adulthood – limits opportunities for sustained civic engagement (Singerman, 2007; Dhillon & Yousef, 2009). Although youth develop creative coping strategies, unstable living conditions make it difficult to commit to civic initiatives over the long term. This trend aligns with future-oriented perceptions that encourage emigration: recent data indicate a high proportion of youth seeking to realize their potential outside the region, associating success with international careers and global mobility (UNDP, 2023; Hanieh, 2015). A key consequence is the regional brain drain, which undermines organizational continuity and the ability to build stable regional networks. As noted earlier, over 50% of youth express a desire to migrate or work outside their country (ASDAA BCW, 2023). Strengthening the institutional and financial foundations of civil society organizations may provide a partial solution to this challenge.

At the organizational level, a key challenge is the **lack of stable financial resources** – a challenge that shapes the scope of youth initiatives and the feasibility of regional collaborations. This shortage makes entrepreneurs dependent on government funding, international aid, and philanthropic funding. Thus, even when significant resources are available, such as government investments in education (approximately 4%–6% of GDP, according to the World Bank, 2023) or international funding amounting to up to 10% of development budgets (OECD, 2022), these funds are often not channeled into building long-term regional infrastructure, but rather into programs that are limited in time and geographic scope. This results in a discontinuous and unequal system of opportunities: Established initiatives are usually able to access funding and expand, while initiatives emerging in the periphery or non-commercial civic initiatives struggle to survive over time due to bureaucratic barriers, lack of access to funding networks, and a lack of budgetary stability. Even the rise of private capital and impact investing, which includes investments of over \$3 billion in the region (MAGNiTT, 2023), does not counterbalance this trend, as it is concentrated in economic hubs and primarily targets profitable scale-up initiatives. As a result, instead of a continuous regional ecosystem, a fragmented landscape of isolated projects with limited impact is emerging, significantly limiting youth’s ability to develop stable cross-border collaborations and build a shared regional network over time.

Another barrier is the **crisis of mistrust in institutions**. A decline in youth’s trust in state institutions and formal organizations leads to a preference for ad hoc initiatives over the establishment of stable frameworks (ASDAA BCW, 2023). Fear of surveillance and restrictive regulation creates a culture of suspicion, which undermines the ability to build trust among regional partners and limits the use of digital spaces as tools for collaboration.

Skills and competency gaps pose an additional barrier to the development of sustainable regional cooperation. Cross-border activities in the Middle East require a set of capabilities that are not always acquired through education, training, or local civic engagement: geopolitical and regional literacy, intercultural communication, sensitive dialogue management, mediation and conflict resolution, management of multilateral partnerships, resource mobilization, impact assessment, secure digital communication and crisis management. In the absence of these competencies, many initiatives remain dependent on personal leadership, informal connections and early-stage enthusiasm, making it difficult to evolve into stable and sustainable frameworks of action. Therefore, developing professional capabilities in youth diplomacy and regional cooperation management is a key prerequisite for transforming isolated initiatives into a sustainable regional civic ecosystem. To address this, a competency model for youth diplomacy is proposed in **Appendix C** of this study.

In addition, barriers related to gender and ageism¹⁶ continue to hinder the participation of young women and youth in general, due to formal restrictions as well as social norms, requiring complex organizational adjustments to ensure equal representation. Finally, many organizations undergo a process of generational institutionalization, whereby youth-led leadership gives way to leadership by older generations, narrowing the space for youth and favoring more conservative modes of action (Berents, Bolten & McEvoy-Levy, 2024).

In conclusion, the youth ecosystem in the Middle East and North Africa is characterized by deep institutional fragmentation, in which the multitude of actors, arenas and initiatives does not coalesce into an integrated regional network, but rather creates a fragmented tapestry of isolated activities that relies heavily on external funding and temporary frameworks. Under these circumstances, the gap between the demographic potential of the younger generation and its ability to become an organized and stable regional force remains wide, indicating that the region's central challenge is not a lack of initiative – but rather the absence of an overarching regional infrastructure that would enable initiatives to translate into systemic impact.

16 Ageism is a discriminatory or stereotypical view of people based on their age. In the context of young people, ageism is expressed in the tendency to view them as an inexperienced, immature, or dangerous group, rather than recognizing their ability to serve as active participants in shaping policy, innovation, and regional cooperation.

Chapter 4

An Inward Look

Youth in the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Jordan

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Despite their different circumstances, all three countries appear to view youth as their most valuable asset for ensuring their resilience and future.

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The youth ecosystem in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is not uniform but shaped by the gap between demographics and resources. This ranges from coping with rapid population growth in the Levant and Maghreb countries, such as Jordan and Morocco, to the need to preserve a distinct national identity in the face of massive migration, and in parallel, cultivating a new generation of leadership in the Gulf states, as exemplified by the UAE. In this chapter, we will delve into these three case studies, representing different geographic and cultural regions, to examine how each country translates its unique challenges into a national strategy. By analyzing institutional structures, identifying key actors and examining prominent programs on the ground, we will explore how these countries are engaging the younger generation to ensure their national resilience and their political and economic future.

1) United Arab Emirates: Youth as the Post-Oil Asset

Our best bet at this period of time where we have wealth is to invest all our resources in education, because there will be a time, 50 years from now, when we load the last barrel of oil aboard the ship. The question is, 50 years from now after we have loaded this last barrel of oil, are we going to feel sad? If our investment today is right, I think - dear brothers and sisters - we will celebrate that moment.

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Government Summit in Dubai, February 2015.¹⁷

The youth sector in the UAE has undergone a rapid process of institutionalization. This has generated a shift in the perception of youth: from a population group dependent on the state, whose needs must be met, to key agents of change in the building of the nation and its future. This development can be divided into three main periods, illustrating the deepening of the government's commitment to the issue and the shift in the perception of youth's role in society. In the first phase, since the establishment of the state in 1971, the government focused on developing basic leisure and sports infrastructure under a dedicated Ministry of Youth and Sports. In the 1980s and 1990s, the sector underwent a process of educational institutionalization, with its integration into the Ministry of Education, based on the view that youth are first and foremost a pedagogical target audience that must be prepared for social and economic integration (Federal Youth Authority, n.d.).

A significant turning point came in February 2016, with the appointment of Shamma Al Mazrui as Minister of State for Youth Affairs. This marked a clear shift toward a policy approach that views youth as active partners in federal-level decision-making processes. This trend was further reinforced by the establishment of the Federal Youth Authority (FYA) in 2018, and later by the appointment of astronaut Dr. Sultan Al Neyadi as Minister of State for Youth Affairs in 2024 (UAE Government, n.d.).

At the heart of the UAE's youth policy lies the National Youth Agenda 2031, a comprehensive policy document that defines five strategic pillars of action. On the economic front, the agenda aims to transform youth into a national growth engine by encouraging technological entrepreneurship, innovation, and integration into the private sector, while reducing dependence on traditional government jobs. In parallel, it emphasizes the importance of preserving national identity and the Arabic language as a cultural anchor, in the face of accelerated globalization and the dramatic shift in the composition of the UAE's population in recent decades due to accelerated migration. In addition, emphasis is placed on academic and professional excellence in future-oriented fields, such as artificial intelligence, applied science and advanced technologies, as well as on the development of "youth diplomacy," which positions young Emiratis as ambassadors of tolerance, innovation, and openness on the international stage (Federal Youth Authority, n.d.; UAE Government, n.d.).

The uniqueness of the Emirati model lies not only in the formulation of an ambitious vision, but also in the creation of legislative, institutional, and technological mechanisms that ensure the translation of policy into action. These mechanisms include the inclusion of youth representatives on the boards of directors of

¹⁷ Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, "His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Keynote Remarks at the 2015 Government Summit in Dubai," 13 February 2015.

government institutions and companies, the establishment of local and sectoral youth councils, and the use of advanced data systems to systematically monitor the needs, attitudes, and challenges of the younger generation, including on social media. This combination of top-down planning with bottom-up proactive engagement creates a new social contract between the state and its youth. In this model, the UAE does not merely provide services to youth but builds a system in which they are key partners in shaping the national vision and strengthening its long-term stability.

In December 2025, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with the Federal Youth Authority, announced the formation of a newly composed Ministry Youth Council and organized its first Youth Retreat. The Council aims to enhance the role of young employees within the Ministry, empower them to contribute to decision-making and future initiatives, and support the development of the diplomatic and consular work environment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

However, alongside its impressive achievements, the top-down model presents certain complexities. Some argue that empowering youth within a centralized framework may sometimes steer their involvement in directions that align with the institutional agenda, particularly in the areas of entrepreneurship, innovation, and the economy. This tension between empowerment and oversight raises questions regarding the degree of autonomy enjoyed by youth councils and the scope available to them for independent critical expression.

When it comes to youth diplomacy and youth engagement in the regional and international arenas, the Emirati approach is based on viewing youth as “ambassadors of soft power,” whose role is to project a narrative of modernity, tolerance, and technological advancement to the world. At the international level, the country systematically works to integrate its young representatives into the most influential forums, such as the UN Climate Change Conferences (Conference of the Parties – COP) and the World Economic Forum (WEF). This aspiration aims to position the UAE as a global hub for shaping the future agenda, utilizing official programs such as “UAE Youth Delegates to the UN.” This activity is not limited to the representational level but translates into the building of “global citizenship” networks, which equip the younger generation to operate in multinational arenas while mastering advanced diplomatic and scientific skills (Federal Youth Authority, n.d.).

At the regional level, the UAE operates through the Arab Youth Center, a pan-Arab body based in Abu Dhabi, to consolidate pan-Arab leadership and influence. The Center’s primary goal is to offer an alternative of hope and entrepreneurship in the face of regional trends of radicalization and instability. The country invests significant resources in exporting its local model of excellence and innovation to neighboring countries, while creating knowledge-sharing platforms that connect thousands of youth across the Middle East under the Emirati brand (Arab Youth Center, 2023). In this way, the country is building a regional “alumni community” of young leaders educated in the values of stability and economic dynamism of the Gulf, thereby strengthening its long-term political influence in the Arab world.

Finally, the Emirati approach is characterized by a close connection between cross-border activities and the fields of science and space. The country’s international missions, led by the Mars mission (“Amal”), serve as a tool for forging academic and technological alliances between young Emiratis and their peers in the West and the East, thereby making science a common language that bridges cultural divides (UAE Space Agency, 2021). The model is highly regulated and centralized, with all cross-border activities aligned with the goals of the “National Youth Agenda 2031,” ensuring that the ambition of the younger generation consistently serves to position the country as a leading regional power in shaping the future.

2) Morocco: Youth as the Key to Stability and a Catalyst for Development and Growth

Given your role in the social development of the nation, you, the country's youth, are our foremost asset. [...] Youth must not be perceived as a burden on society, but rather as a potent force that contributes to the nation's development.

King Mohammed VI of Morocco, August 20, 2012.¹⁸

For the Kingdom of Morocco, the youth sector is not merely a social-economic issue, but a critical pillar in the Kingdom's national security and resilience. Central to this perception is the direct connection between the monarchy and the younger generation; King Mohammed VI is portrayed in the national narrative as the “supreme guardian” of youth and views them as the guarantors of the continuity and stability of the dynasty and the nation. “Youth Day” (Fête de la Jeunesse), celebrated annually on the King's birthday, serves as a political statement emphasizing that the kingdom's future is intertwined with the realization of the potential of its sons and daughters. This vision was distilled in King Mohammed VI's seminal speech on August 20, 2012, in which he defined youth as the backbone of the nation.

This royal patronage grants the cause immunity from political upheavals and is reflected in initiatives such as the “Intelaka” program¹⁹ – a national initiative that provides funding and support to young entrepreneurs and is seen as a bulwark against radicalization and social frustration (Desrues, 2017). However, the realization of this vision faces a complex demographic reality; as of 2026, the 15–34 age group numbers over 11 million people and accounts for approximately 33% of the total population (HCP, 2022). This “youth bulge” places heavy pressure on the country's infrastructure, as an entire generation finds itself in the “Waithood” phase – a prolonged transition period toward economic independence characterized by significant difficulty in securing housing and stable employment (World Bank, 2021). Despite expanded access to education, the gap between academic training and market demands remains wide, a fact that serves as the primary driver for adopting the “New Development Model” (CSMD, 2021), which aims for rapid social and digital integration to prevent the undermining of national stability.

To bridge these gaps, the Kingdom operates an ecosystem that combines royal authority with technocratic executive capabilities. The Ministry of Youth, Culture, and Communication serves as the backbone of this system, managing an extensive network of over 640 youth centers and 400 women's centers. These facilities are gradually becoming hubs for entrepreneurship and technology, with the launch of tools such as the “Youth Card” (“Pass Jeunes”) – a free app that provides youth aged 16–30 with benefits and discounts in culture, sports, transportation and other services, and is designed to expand youth's access to opportunities and public spaces throughout Morocco.

This dynamic reveals a unique model of royal technocracy as an alternative to bureaucracy. The monarchy, in effect, uses actors such as the OCP Group and UM6P University as “islands of excellence,” through which it promotes the integration of advanced technologies and global standards into existing government infrastructure (Boutieri, 2016). Unlike the Emirati model, in which the government itself acts as an efficient and unified technocratic body, Morocco creates “bypass routes” through companies close to the royal family to provide modern services and rebuild Generation Z's trust in state institutions.

On the international stage, Morocco is positioning its youth as agents of influence and as a bridge between Africa, the Mediterranean basin, and the Atlantic region. Leadership programs such as the Atlantic Dialogues Emerging Leaders Program, run by the leading research institute The Policy Center for the New South, are

¹⁸ Mohammed VI, “Full Text of the Speech Delivered by King Mohammed VI on the Occasion of King and People's Anniversary,” Morocco World News, 20 August 2012, accessed 27 May 2026, Morocco World News

¹⁹ The name of the program in Arabic is انطلاقة, which means “setting out,” “getting started,” “taking off,” or “beginning.”

mobilizing youth to establish Rabat's position as an intellectual hub of the "Global South." Similarly, networks and organizations such as Youth for Climate Morocco are leading the Kingdom's climate diplomacy with Europe and helping to advance Morocco's national green energy agenda. In the Middle East, since the signing of the Abraham Accords, youth have become agents of "warm peace," and Morocco has become one of the places where youth from across the Middle East are welcomed as they are. Therefore, it is not surprising that the city of Marrakech was recently selected as the "Youth Capital of the Islamic World for 2025" – an official recognition of the rising influence of the Kingdom's youth (Sika, 2018).

The international efforts of young Moroccans take on a unique depth as ambassadors of faith, drawing inspiration from the King's spiritual authority as "Commander of the Faithful" ("Amir al-Mu'minin").²⁰ They serve as messengers of the concept of "the Middle Way" (Al-Wasatiyya),²¹ which functions as a tool for moderate religious diplomacy in the face of extremist ideologies. A central pillar of this effort is the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Murchidines, and Murchidates, which trains a generation of religious leaders who speak the language of Generation Z and combine loyalty to tradition with modernization (Wainscott, 2017). Through institutions such as the Moroccan League of Religious Scholars (al-Rabita al-Muhammadiyah li-l-Ulama), young Moroccans help promote a tolerant religious and moral alternative to extremism across the entire region.

In conclusion, the Moroccan model positions the younger generation as a strategic pillar and a means of ensuring Moroccan sovereignty, as well as a guarantee of the country's stability and prosperity. By bridging social divides, promoting economic empowerment and fostering leadership with a transcontinental outlook and moderate religious affiliation, the Kingdom aims to transform the demographic challenge into an engine of growth and innovation. Looking ahead, Morocco's success in connecting its sons and daughters to the national narrative and establishing a relationship of trust between them and the Kingdom's institutions will determine its ability to continue serving as a stable and influential bridge between Africa, the Middle East, and the Western world.

3) Jordan: "Youth are a promise, not a threat"

"Young Jordanians never cease to amaze me with their infectious energy and ambitious dreams. They are the coders and creators, the disruptors and innovators of tomorrow. Investing in their boundless talents is an investment in a bright future for our region and our world."

King Abdullallah II, at the Future Investment Initiative, Riyadh 2019.²²

For the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the youth sector represents both an existential challenge and a strategic opportunity. This view is rooted in a historical doctrine coined by the late King Hussein, according to which "people are our most precious asset" (الإنسان أغلى ما نملك). In the absence of natural resources, this statement has become a strategic pillar for a country grappling with significant "demographic bulge," where those aged 12–30 constitute approximately 36% of the population (Ministry of Youth, 2019). The Jordanian model

20 In Arabic, the title is Amir al-Mu'minin (أمير المؤمنين), and its practical meaning is that the King of Morocco holds spiritual authority over all believers, including Muslims, Jews, and Christians. In this context, the important distinction between the religious sphere and the sphere of faith becomes clearer: the former relates primarily to ritual aspects, while the latter relates to spiritual and faith-based aspects, and therefore serves as a space that enables encounters between believers of different religions, as long as these religions share the principle of the unity of God.

21 The concept of Al-Wasatiyyah (Arabic: الوسطية) embodies the "middle way" in Islam, a religious and social approach that emphasizes moderation, balance, tolerance, and the avoidance of extremism. In the Moroccan context, this concept is a central pillar of the Kingdom's religious diplomacy and its efforts to promote moderate Islam, prevent radicalization, and foster a discourse of inclusion, stability, and coexistence among followers of different faiths.

22 Abdullah II, "Speech by His Majesty King Abdullah II at the Future Investment Initiative 2019," Riyadh, 29 October 2019, The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, accessed 27 May 2026.

operates under geopolitical constraints unique to the Levant: dependence on foreign aid and the absorption of continuous waves of refugees, which place a heavy strain on national infrastructure. Within this reality, youth are viewed as the “pioneers of modernization” who are expected to rescue the Kingdom from economic stagnation (Jordan Strategy Forum, 2023).

The structure of Jordan’s youth ecosystem is based on a division between the state level and initiatives sponsored by the royal family. At the head of the governmental apparatus stands the Ministry of Youth, which manages the national strategy and operates a network of approximately 200 youth centers designed to build capacity and foster civic engagement (Ministry of Youth, 2019). However, the core strength of the Jordanian model lies in the non-governmental arms operating under direct royal patronage, including three notable foundations:

- **The Crown Prince Foundation (CPF):** The most dynamic foundation in the field, personally led by Crown Prince Hussein. The foundation focuses on connecting Generation Z to the professions of the future through projects in innovation, nanosatellites, and technological entrepreneurship, with the aim of bridging the gap between academia and the global job market (Crown Prince Foundation, n.d.).
- **King Abdullah II Fund for Development (KAJD):** Serves as a strategic arm for investing in human capital. The fund operates extensive vocational training, scholarship, and excellence programs, and encourages youth to participate in community and political initiatives as part of the Kingdom’s modernization process.
- **The Jordan River Foundation (JRF):** Led by Queen Rania, this foundation focuses on the economic and social empowerment of youth and women in disadvantaged communities, with an emphasis on child protection and the development of social entrepreneurship as a tool for community stability.

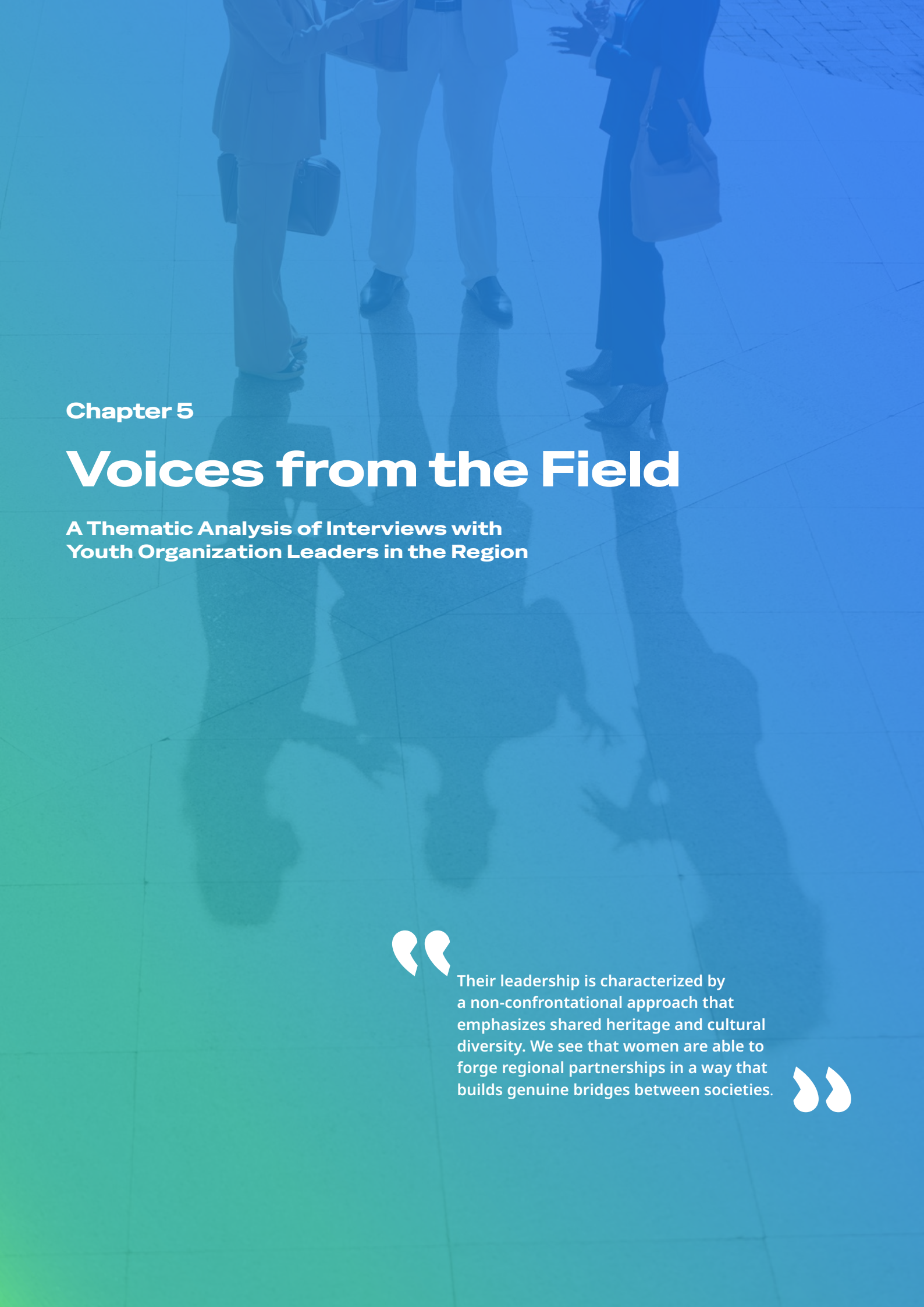
The core of Jordan’s current strategy is the “Economic Modernization Vision,” aiming to create one million new jobs over the next decade, with an emphasis on the digital economy, entrepreneurship, and tech (Government of Jordan, 2022). The uniqueness of the Jordanian model lies in its attempt to link economic empowerment with political reform; the government is promoting legislation that encourages youth to join political parties and participate in parliament, recognizing that a lack of political prospects is a recipe for unrest. However, the realization of this vision faces structural barriers, chief among them a deep gender gap: while young women in Jordan are among the most educated in the region, their participation rate in the labor market and in politics remains among the lowest in the world, standing at less than 14% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023).

On the international and regional stage, the Kingdom has positioned itself as a champion of integrating the younger generation into security and peace efforts. Jordan’s rise to global leadership in this field was no accident, but rather the result of a strategic diplomatic campaign that began at the height of the fight against ISIS radicalization in 2015. The historic turning point came in April of that year, when Crown Prince Hussein, at the age of 20, became the youngest person ever to preside over a meeting of the UN Security Council. In his seminal speech the prince laid the groundwork for a shift in perception regarding youth in the Middle East and beyond when he said that youth are not “a marginalised group, but rather a targeted group. They are targeted for their huge potential, self-confidence and ability to change the world” (United Nations, April 2015). His personal leadership found practical expression just a few months later, when Jordan hosted the World Youth Forum in Amman, where the “Amman Declaration” was drafted, serving as the basis for Security Council Resolution 2250 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The move, led by Jordan as the “drafting initiative,” branded the Kingdom as a powerhouse of soft power and established Prince Hussein’s image as the leading voice of Generation Z on the international stage (United Nations, 2015).

Even today, this resolution forms the basis of Jordan’s youth diplomacy initiative, which aims to train delegations of “peace ambassadors” to promote a narrative of moderation and tolerance around the world. At the regional level, Jordan serves as a hub for global dialogue on refugees, climate, and security, leveraging its geographic location as a bridge between the West and the Middle East and building networks of young leaders that act as a central bulwark against the proliferation of extremist ideologies in the Levant. In this way, young Jordanians

are viewed not merely as a domestic asset, but as agents of multinational influence who promote regional stability and the Kingdom's political standing on the global stage.

In conclusion, while Morocco and Jordan navigate the tension between a scarcity of resources and immense human potential, the United Arab Emirates is channeling its abundant resources to nurture the future generation of Emirati leadership. In Morocco's case, youth serve as a catalyst for development and a means of promoting "intercontinental bridges," while Jordan is working to cultivate a generation of "entrepreneurial citizens" – youth capable of creating economic opportunities for themselves while remaining loyal to the Kingdom and its stability at the heart of the dynamic Middle East. Despite their different circumstances, all three countries appear to view youth as their most valuable asset for ensuring their resilience and future, and are charting the course from the top down.



Chapter 5

Voices from the Field

**A Thematic Analysis of Interviews with
Youth Organization Leaders in the Region**

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Their leadership is characterized by a non-confrontational approach that emphasizes shared heritage and cultural diversity. We see that women are able to forge regional partnerships in a way that builds genuine bridges between societies.

”

"We don't want to only talk about the conflict; we want to improve our organization and build genuine partnerships... It's not just work – it's the growth of an entire community."

Wissam Ziada, founder of Takadom (East Jerusalem)

This chapter offers an opportunity to learn from the collective experience of youth who have chosen to turn the abstract concept of regional cooperation in the Middle East into everyday action on the ground. In a region where physical borders and narratives of conflict are often perceived as inevitable, these organizations act as pioneers, forging new paths of cross-border partnership and friendship.

The findings presented here are based on a series of in-depth interviews, validated by a detailed online questionnaire, conducted with the leaders of ten youth organizations from Morocco, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, and Azerbaijan, as well as representatives of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. The dialogue with them allowed for the distillation of lessons learned along the way: models that have proven effective in addressing barriers and challenges, unexpected discoveries and insights into the potential of the younger generation to shape the region's future. These insights are presented through six key themes detailed below.

Theme 1: From Discourse on Coexistence to Co-creation

The first theme emerging from the study is the shift from discussing "peace" or "tolerance" as abstract aspirations to creating practical models of joint action that are integrated into daily life. The youth and organizations active in the region understand that to bring about sustainable change, ideas must be translated into practical actions – whether this involves managing essential resources or managing shared religious life in a multicultural space. This approach defuses the charged political debate in favor of creating practical mechanisms that generate tangible value for all parties.

A prominent example of translating values into environmental and economic practice can be found in the work of **EcoPeace**, an organization that promotes environmental cooperation in the Israel-Jordan-Palestine border triangle. The organization promotes the "Green Blue Deal" project, a model based on each country's comparative advantages: Jordan produces solar energy, and Israel supplies desalinated water. Julian Harel, a teacher and program coordinator at the organization (Interview #9), explains that dialogue over existential needs allows youth to build trust in the shadow of conflict. While this type of cooperation is not free from political disputes, it illustrates how environmental needs can create practical interdependence:

We're not just talking about peace; we're talking about water and energy... Youth can become a turning point for change. They foster direct, practical, cross-border cooperation... and provide a safe space to find win-win solutions that transcend the conflict. Nature does not recognize the boundaries we have imposed on it. If you want to solve marine pollution, you need cooperation.

The shift from rhetoric to action is also evident in the religious sphere through the activities of the **Azerbaijan Institute of Theology (AIT)**. Rather than engaging in mere discourse on "coexistence," the institute implements a model known as "Unity of Islam," which aims to break down the structural barriers between Sunni and Shia communities. The model involves training religious leaders (imams) who study both traditions simultaneously and are intended to serve all believers. In practice, this is manifested in "Unity Mosques," where believers from both traditions pray together in the same space; the prayer is led alternately by a Sunni imam and a Shia imam, with believers from both traditions praying together, standing side by side without separation in the same space. Agil Shirinov (Interview #1), the Institute's rector, describes how turning theory into daily religious practice fosters deep understanding among youth:

Our approach is unique in the Islamic world. We train imams for both Sunni and Shia mosques and make no distinction between them. We teach Shia principles to Sunnis and Sunni principles to Shias as well. Why? So that they can get to know one another. If you get to know one another better, then you'll understand one

another better... We send our students to Turkey and Kazakhstan to experience their culture and see how we can foster shared learning on the ground.

Taken together, these examples illustrate that the transition from theoretical discourse to practical implementation signals progress toward regional integration and the deepening of ties. Whether in the realm of water security or the management of religious life, youth organizations are adopting a model of action in which partnership is not merely a goal, but a means of creating shared value and mutual dependence throughout the Middle East.

Theme 2: Challenging Perceptions of the ‘Other’ Through Shared Heritage and Intercultural Encounters

This theme examines how youth in the MENA region draw on the past, shared heritage, and direct encounters to dismantle social and media constructions of the ‘Other,’ who is often portrayed in a negative, and even hostile, light. The findings indicate that challenging these perceptions becomes possible when history is presented not as a force that separates different groups, but as a bridge that enables youth to locate themselves within the story of the ‘Other.’ Youth in the MENA region and beyond are redefining their identities beyond narrow national boundaries, while advancing a multicultural identity as a practical tool for breaking down psychological and political barriers and challenging historical narratives that perpetuate division and conflict.

The collaboration between the **Working and Studying Youth Movement** (NOAL – Noar HaOved VeHaLomed), a joint movement for young Jews and Arabs from Israel, and the **Mimouna organization**, which works to preserve Jewish heritage in Morocco, illustrates how heritage and physical encounters are intertwined. Salwa Abu-Kashef, a member of the movement’s Arab branch team and coordinator of alumni in the Arab community (Interview #6), describes the powerful experience of the joint delegation to Morocco. According to her, the encounter with “real life” and the living heritage allows youth to break free from the images prevalent in the media and on social media:

In October 2022, we traveled to Morocco with a youth delegation. It was an introductory trip focused on coexistence, and we were Arabs [Israeli Arabs], Druze and Jews together. It was positively shocking and moving to walk around Rabat, in the Mellah (the old Jewish quarter), and see the shared life there and gain a sense that it is possible to live together. When the young Moroccans came to Israel in December 2022, they saw real life, not the “dark world” they’d heard about on TV; it was an eye-opener.

The use of heritage as a tool for connection gains further depth in projects that make complex historical chapters accessible from a regional perspective. The “From Hate to Hope” project, which is also a collaboration between the two organizations, focuses on Holocaust education through North African narratives. George Stevens, Director of International Projects at the Movement (Interview #6), explains:

In 2023, we launched a new project to train teachers, school administrators, local government officials, and museum staff from Morocco on Holocaust education, as this subject is not taught in most countries in the Middle East and North Africa. [...] We worked on adapting the content to the North African region and the manifestations of the Holocaust in the local context. After six months of training in Morocco, we embarked on a study tour to Poland and Germany. This was the first delegation of educators from the Arab and Muslim world to visit those countries. The trip and the materials were in Arabic and Moroccan Arabic (Darija). This took place during the war and required building emotional and social trust, and the translation was not only linguistic – but cultural – so that our traditions and leaders, as well as theirs, would be represented, thereby fostering mutual respect. At the end of the journey, we received very positive feedback from the participants, who expressed a desire to teach about it, to expand the initiative, and said that it had changed their lives and their perspective. [...] This reinforced the understanding that transformative encounters cannot be purely theoretical; the cultural-emotional aspect is also important.

Similarly, the **Yekmal** organization, which operates in Germany among the Kurdish diaspora and serves as a hub for youth from Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, demonstrates how multilingualism can serve as a bridge between identities and a source of civic solidarity. The organization enables youth who grew up in systems hostile to one another to come together under one roof. Aram Aqil, co-director of the organization (Interview #4), emphasizes multiculturalism as an asset rather than a divisive factor, and the openness of the youth:

In Kurdish, "Yekmal" means "one home"... We use six languages in our organization: Kurdish, Persian, Arabic, Turkish, English, and German. Many communities come to us... We want youth to see their identity as an asset. In the MENA region, adults don't always take youth seriously, but here they contribute to openness and build connections that transcend the original conflicts.

This process, which is based on learning about the heritage and humanity of the 'Other,' often encourages youth to embrace the concept of "global citizenship." Soufiyan Saaoudi, president of the **YES (Youth Empowering Society)** organization in Morocco, shares a transformative personal experience and emphasizes the need to create a safe space for youth to meet:

Our role is to raise awareness... not just awareness of their immediate surroundings, but of their status as "global citizens." What happens in another country can affect you, and vice versa. To do this, we must break down the mental barriers of "I'm better than you" or "you're the bad guy." The best way is to sit together and create a safe environment for youth to meet. Let me give you a personal example. In 2012, I attended my first international conference. There I met Egyptians, Palestinians, and also Arab citizens of Israel (Arabs of '48). I was shocked when I saw an Israeli passport for the first time; I felt an inner aversion. But then I realized they were human beings just like me.

In conclusion, the combination of these voices indicates that youth are tapping into their shared heritage as a platform for creating a new regional language. The ability to transform the polarizing images of a black-and-white world into a complex perception of reality and mutual humanity makes it possible to dismantle historical narratives and political stereotypes, and to establish regional and global civic solidarity that challenges the psychological walls of separation in the MENA region.

Theme 3: Adaptive Resilience amid Conflict, Structural Barriers, and Personal Costs

Alongside opportunities for cooperation, youth activism in the MENA region is limited by ideological and security barriers stemming from the region's conflict-ridden environment and tensions between different groups. This theme highlights the heavy personal and organizational toll of operating within a reality of ongoing conflict, where cross-border civic initiatives are often perceived as unusual or controversial, and at times even as a threat to internal cohesion and physical security. Youth and organizations are forced to navigate a highly charged social space with great caution, adopting strategies of "quiet activism" and discretion to ensure the safety of participants and the continuity of their work.

The data from the online survey confirms this reality, with "political instability" ranked as the most significant barrier, alongside "social pressure" and criticism from the surrounding community. An example of this complexity emerges from an interview with an organization operating within the Palestinian Authority and the West Bank. The interviewee describes a situation in which the very act of engaging with the 'Other' or even addressing peacebuilding issues can provoke social opposition and even attacks from one's immediate circle, requiring constant risk management and a low public profile. The interviewee (Interview #5) shares the responsibility that accompanies his work under such social pressure:

They attacked us as part of a campaign opposing this kind of collaboration. It got to the point where I asked to remove the organization's logo from our publications until tensions calmed down, because I'm afraid for my community and for the people who work with me. There is a deep emotional divide – the youth here feel

that the world has become indifferent to their suffering, and this makes the work of building bridges much more complicated and dangerous.

In addition to social barriers, regional conflicts create significant logistical obstacles, disrupting spatial continuity and hindering mobility and the ability to engage in civic interaction. Mamoun Khreisat of the **URI (United Religions Initiative) MENA** organization (Interview #7) describes a reality in which closed borders and tensions between neighboring countries make physical encounters nearly impossible:

We face enormous challenges... For example, participants from Yemen or Syria cannot attend regional meetings due to travel restrictions and conflicts between countries. Our challenge is to build resilience within these groups so that they can continue to operate locally even when they are physically unable to meet with their counterparts in neighboring countries. We must develop working models that do not rely solely on in-person meetings, which are currently off-limits to us.

This reality requires organizations to act with extreme caution to maintain trust within their communities. An anonymous interviewee (Interview #8) explains that discretion and withdrawal from the digital sphere do not stem from a lack of transparency, but rather constitute a necessary survival strategy to prevent harassment or attacks against activists in their natural environment:

At some point, you have to know when to take a step back. I'm very stubborn when it comes to the safety of my people. The participants fear they might be attacked or that their families might be harassed because of their involvement in sensitive activities in such a tense region. Therefore, it is better to protect them and treat our relationship with them as a friendly and personal one, rather than exploiting their activities for publicity or "likes" on social media. We need to have a deep understanding of the geopolitical reality and regional taboos so as not to put anyone at risk.

This reality raises the question: How do young leaders manage to maintain faith in partnership during a regional crisis? This is where the critical role of the organizational infrastructure comes into play. It serves not merely as a platform for project management, but as an anchor of adaptive resilience that protects individuals and their work from the region's upheavals. George from the **Working and Studying Youth** in Israel (Interview #6) distills this insight by explaining that in times of crisis, the organizational structure becomes a bastion of continuity:

Personal friendships are important, but in times of war or crisis, they can fall apart under pressure. Organizations, on the other hand, foster relationships that are far more sustainable and stable. They build infrastructure, develop educational models, and know how to weather difficult times. An organization gives a young person the support and safe space to continue believing in the partnership even when everything around them is in turmoil.

The combination of these voices makes it clear that life and activity in a challenging environment are reshaping the nature of youth organizations' work. The shift to "quiet activism," building networks based on personal trust, finding creative ways to meet without physical contact, and avoiding digital exposure are adaptation strategies through which young leaders manage to maintain active channels of communication. The ability to continue their work despite social pressure, physical barriers, and personal costs attests to the exceptional adaptive resilience of these youth as agents of change in a complex reality.

Theme 4: Women's Leadership as a Driving Force for Regional Integration

Women's experiences and the leadership opportunities available to them vary considerably across the region, depending on factors such as nationality, regime type, social structure, legal status, socioeconomic background and proximity to conflict zones. However, in the contexts examined here, the issue of gender emerges not only as a matter of equal rights but as a unique voice, often characterized by a combination of compassion,

inclusivity and pragmatism within regional action. Women's leadership challenges traditional, centralized institutional structures, offering instead models based on listening, inclusivity, and problem-solving within the community.

A notable example of women's empowerment as a tool for social stability can be seen in the work of the organization **YES (Youth Empowering Society)** in Morocco. The organization leads the "Hear My Voice" project, which provides women in geographically and socially marginalized areas with the tools to make their voices heard in public discourse and to combat extremism. Soufiyan (Interview #3) explains that women's leadership is a necessary condition for democratization and for society's ability to resist radicalization:

The organization works to empower women, recognizing that they are key agents of change. Through the "Hear My Voice" project, we give women the tools to make their voices heard, participate in local political processes, and combat extremism. Since 2018, we have been working on the ground to educate women about their rights, because we believe that a society where women have a voice is a more stable and resilient society.

In parallel, Wissam, from the **Takadom** organization operating in East Jerusalem and the West Bank (Interview #5), draws a direct link between the development of local women's leadership and the ability to lead peace-building projects. She describes how the COVID-19 crisis served as a turning point, during which women assumed leadership roles in the community out of pragmatic necessity, and how this power is now translating into regional partnerships:

I began to realize that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the most affected group was women. They became the leaders of their homes and communities during the crisis. For me, peacebuilding and women's empowerment programs are not just a job – they are about the growth of an entire community. Women view regional integration as an opportunity to replace the old male-dominated centralization with pragmatic approaches based on cooperation. We do not want to just talk about the conflict – we want to improve our organization and build genuine partnerships.

Another example of the importance of a gender perspective emerges from the work of an organization focused on the rights of religious minorities and freedom of religion. The findings indicate that women within minority communities are often the ones who lead the most conciliatory and inclusive approach, while working to bridge the gap between marginalized communities (Interview #10):

Our work with youth and students strongly highlights the role of women from minority communities. They are at the forefront of peacebuilding and reconciliation. Their leadership is characterized by a non-confrontational approach that emphasizes shared heritage and cultural diversity. We see that women are able to forge regional partnerships around issues of freedom of religion and conscience in a way that builds genuine bridges between societies.

The analysis in this section shows that women leaders in the Middle East are a significant factor contributing to social cohesion and regional integration. Through political empowerment, community leadership in times of crisis and the promotion of minority rights, women offer an alternative to traditional models of leadership and drive integration based on human needs, openness, tolerance, and cross-border cooperation.

Theme 5: Technology as a Cross-Border Tool for Accessibility and the Dissemination of Knowledge

This theme focuses on the use of technological and digital tools to bridge historical and geographical divides, enabling continued collaboration even when the political reality does not allow for physical meetings. Youth are harnessing innovation not only as a technical means, but as an educational tool that fosters a regional ecosystem of knowledge sharing.

A prominent example of this can be seen in the work of the **Mimouna** organization in Morocco, which uses advanced technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and 360-degree virtual tours to preserve and make Jewish heritage accessible. For the organization's leaders, technology is a key tool for actively connecting the younger generation to their country's cultural diversity. Abdelhak El Kaokabi, the organization's director of education (Interview #2), explains the rationale behind the choice to embrace innovation:

We use technology, such as 360-degree photography and augmented reality, to preserve heritage and reconstruct sites that are physically inaccessible. It's not just about history; it's an educational tool. We want youth to see that investing in this isn't merely a superficial concern for the upper classes... but something that stabilizes the country. Technology helps us turn the idea of coexistence into something in which youth take an active part through preservation and documentation projects.

In addition, technology serves as a means of disseminating and making knowledge accessible, as evidenced by the interview with an organization that operates an online learning platform enabling youth from across the region to access content on identity and peacebuilding, thereby creating an educational infrastructure that is not dependent on the physical crossing of borders (Interview #8):

We have an online learning platform offering courses on identity, peacebuilding and coexistence. This allows us to reach youth and university students and provide them with content that is hard to find elsewhere. Technology is a critical tool for conveying our messages and building capacity among youth in the MENA region, especially when physical movement is restricted.

Technology, therefore, is not merely a tool for accessibility, but the infrastructure that enables the young leadership of the Middle East to continue to exert influence even when operating beyond the region's geographical borders, as will be discussed in the next theme. However, it is important to note that there is a "digital divide" in the Middle East, and youth in peripheral areas, refugee camps, or war zones may not benefit equally from this trend.

Theme 6: The Diaspora as a Safe Space for Influence and a "Sandbox" for Initiatives

This theme reveals a reversal of the classic model of social change – rather than processes of reconciliation and integration emerging from within the geographical space of the home country and spreading outward, they are sometimes built outside the region – in cities such as Berlin, Paris, or London – and from there trickle back into the MENA region. The diaspora functions as a kind of "sandbox," where political and security freedom of action allows youth to create models of collaboration that are difficult, and sometimes impossible, to implement in their countries of origin due to political or social constraints. In this context, it is important to note that youth in the diaspora in Europe, America, and around the world also face discrimination, bureaucratic hurdles related to visas and residency permits, and sometimes even community pressure. However, the ability to operate outside the geographical boundaries of the MENA region allows for a certain degree of flexibility.

The most salient example of this trend is evident in the work of **Yekmal**, an organization based in Germany that serves as a hub for youth who have emigrated from Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. The opportunity to meet within the European space allows these youth to shed their national baggage and build a new civic solidarity, which they then carry back to their families and communities in their home countries. Aram (Interview #4) emphasizes the relative freedom of action afforded by living outside the MENA region:

In the countries of origin in the MENA region, politics is dominated by long-standing leaders and rigid hierarchies that leave no room for youth. Here in Germany, within our organization, we are able to bring together youth who grew up under narratives of hostility – Kurds and Arabs from Syria or Turkey. This space in Germany allows us to build a model of "one home" (Yekmal), where they not only live together but learn to develop shared leadership. They pass these tools – multilingualism and mutual respect – on through

social media to families and friends left behind, thereby sowing the seeds of a shift in perception within the region itself.

The role of the diaspora as a bridge that exports initiatives and ideas and as a catalyst for change in the Middle East is also evident in the activities of regional organizations such as the **United Religions Initiative (URI)**. Mamoun Khreisat (Interview #7) notes that often, the youth who have been exposed to models of cooperation while living abroad or at international gatherings are the ones who return and establish “cooperation circles” in their own countries:

We see that the strongest bonds are sometimes formed precisely when youth are outside their home countries. Abroad, physical and political barriers disappear. They discover that the problems faced by a young person from Yemen are similar to those faced by a young person from Jordan. Meeting in the neutral space of the diaspora allows them to build leadership networks that are more resilient to local conflicts. As they maintain ties with the MENA region, they become mediators of new ideas and models of integration that would have been hard to imagine within the region's polarized reality.

This theme suggests that the diaspora is a critical component of the security and resilience of youth organizations. It enables them to bypass closed borders and strict oversight, and to turn the experience gained outside the Middle East into a source of inspiration for communities in their home countries, provided that the power of youth is channeled toward creating positive change. The diaspora is not merely a refuge for refugees and migrants, but a strategic sphere of influence and a bridge between the Middle East and the world beyond it.

The six themes reflect how youth in the region are promoting Middle Eastern regionalism from the bottom up, thanks to their adaptability and resilience, which allow them to move flexibly between local initiatives, digital networks and the Middle Eastern diaspora. This young leadership succeeds in transforming division and hostility into cross-border co-creation, while harnessing female leadership, shared heritage, and global identity as anchors of change. In doing so, youth are not merely a target audience, but architects and strategic partners in shaping the future of the Middle East.

Conclusions and Recommendations

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

This study sought to examine the role of youth and youth organizations in regional processes in the Middle East and North Africa, within a regional context characterized by increasing connectivity on the one hand, and ongoing political, economic, and social fragmentation on the other. The study's findings indicate that the gap between physical connectivity and social integration cannot be bridged solely through state agreements or railways, roads and gas pipelines. It requires a broad, flexible and sustainable civil infrastructure, within which youth organizations can play a central role as drivers of action and cross-border cooperation.

In this sense, youth are not merely the target audience for regional policies concerning demographics, employment, and internal stability, but active participants in shaping a "civic regionalism" that emerges from the bottom up. They operate in the space between the local, regional, and global; between internal needs and external opportunities; and between an abstract political vision and the daily practice of cross-border collaboration.

A. Key Findings

1. Shifting from viewing youth as a demographic burden to a strategic asset: The study's findings point to a paradigm shift in perceptions of youth's role in the region. Instead of viewing them as a problem, a demographic challenge and at times even a threat to internal stability – and as a group that might be easy prey for extremist elements – there is a growing perception of them as a strategic asset and as active partners in shaping the region's future. Youth and youth organizations are no longer passive objects of policy, but rather shapers of norms, builders of networks, and generators of trust, capable of creating a foundation of cross-border social connections that look toward the future.

2. Developing collaborations through co-creation: One of the key insights emerging from the research is the need to shift from activities focused on dialogue and discourse – which may sometimes revolve around loaded concepts such as "peace" and "normalization" – to practices of project-based co-creation. Youth organizations tend to build collaborations around concrete challenges such as water, climate, renewable energy, employment, entrepreneurship, and digital literacy. In this sense, it appears that "peace" on the ground does not necessarily begin with an ideological declaration, but rather with joint action, in which each side contributes to the shared creation of value, trust, and positive interdependence. However, it is important to note that tensions and disputes arising from regional political contexts do not necessarily disappear, and it is important that the organizations involved possess the necessary capabilities to address them, as detailed in Appendix C.

3. The organizational unit as the key to advancing regional integration processes: Research shows that the central unit of action in emerging regional integration processes is not the individual (micro level), but rather the organization and the network (meso level). The organizational infrastructure provides activists with a "backing" and a safe space that allows them to continue believing in the partnership "even when everything around them is burning." It is the organizations that provide institutional infrastructure, develop educational models, and create stable, sustainable relationships that translate into adaptive resilience in the face of instability.

4. Adaptive resilience in times of crisis: In a regional context characterized by uncertainty, tension, and political and security risks, youth organizations develop patterns of adaptive resilience. They learn to act cautiously, adapt their language, adjust their methods, and maintain relationships even when the public sphere becomes hostile. A key insight in this context is the importance of “quiet activism” – professional, discreet, and sustained work that enables collaborations to survive even during periods when public statements are not possible and/or may endanger participants.

5. Diaspora communities as incubators for civic regionalism: The study found that Middle Eastern diaspora communities in Europe and other regions serve as important spaces for forging cross-border civic ties. In some cases, it is precisely outside the region that youth from countries in hostile relations manage to meet, develop a common language, and explore new models of cooperation. In this sense, the diaspora serves as a kind of “sandbox” for civic regionalism – a relatively safe space where models of trust, solidarity, and joint action can be tested, before their possible transfer to the Middle Eastern region.

6. Women’s leadership as a catalyst for civic integration: The study’s findings highlight the unique role of young women leaders in promoting regional cooperation. Women leaders in the civic sphere tend to develop models of inclusion, mediation, reconciliation, and community problem-solving, and sometimes succeed in operating in spaces where formal political discourse remains blocked. Their involvement is not merely a matter of representation, but an essential component in building sensitive, diverse, and sustainable regional processes.

7. Regional connectivity as a response to internal challenges: The study indicates that turning to the regional sphere does not come at the expense of addressing local challenges but may in fact be part of the solution. For many youth, regional collaborations open horizons of employment, entrepreneurship, learning, meaning, and belonging. In this sense, connections with the “outside” can help address internal challenges by creating new spheres of action beyond national borders.

B. Operational Recommendations

1. Strengthening regional youth organizations and networks as a force multiplier for impact: Priority should be given to investing in the institutional capacity-building of youth organizations and regional networks, including strengthening management mechanisms, strategic planning, knowledge retention, staff development, measurement and evaluation and coordination among organizations. This investment enables the transformation of individual agency into a sustainable institutional force, and establishes operational continuity, organizational resilience, and the ability to withstand challenges even when individual leaders change or when the political landscape becomes more volatile. Furthermore, foundations, donors, and international institutions must shift from funding short-term projects to investing in long-term organizational infrastructure (core funding). For youth organizations to function as regional resilience actors, they need not only operational budgets but also support for team building, knowledge management, strategic planning, measurement and evaluation, and institutional capacity development.

2. Promoting initiatives for action around shared challenges (co-creation): It is essential to support initiatives that generate practical value around shared challenges such as climate, water, energy, employment, technology, and education. Such projects enable the building of trust through action, reduce political resistance, and create a sense of mutual benefit among participants. Instead of starting with an ideological discourse, one should begin by identifying a solution to a shared problem. In the long term, such activity can lead to the creation of a stronger foundation for reconciliation among the peoples of the region.

3. Developing skills for youth diplomacy and cross-border project management: Educational institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners should develop specialized training programs for youth diplomacy. These programs should include skills in cross-cultural mediation, network management, regional digital work, leading international projects, the ability to work with various governmental, civil society, and business actors, dealing with conflicts and politically complex work environments, and inter-community

communication. These are not merely “soft” skills, but a professional foundation for youth’s integration into a developing regional economy and society.

4. Creating safe spaces for regional engagement: Donors, international institutions, and other stakeholders must recognize that not all cooperation can or should be public. During periods of tension, professional, discreet, and safe spaces are of great importance, allowing youth to maintain working relationships without exposing them to social, political, or security risks. “Quiet engagement” is not a weakness, but rather, at times, a necessary condition for continuity.

5. Investing in Diaspora Communities as Regional Bridges: Middle Eastern diaspora communities should be recognized as a strategic resource for building civic regionalism. Youth organizations, student groups and organizations of migrants and refugees living in Europe and beyond can serve as bridges between societies, develop models of civic solidarity, and create safe spaces for experimentation in regional cooperation. It is recommended to allocate dedicated resources to diaspora programs, particularly in the areas of leadership, entrepreneurship, culture, and dialogue.

6. Permanent inclusion of youth in regional forums: Governments, regional institutions, international conferences, and follow-up frameworks for political agreements must include permanent representation from youth organizations and youth in general. This inclusion must be substantive, not merely symbolic: youth must participate in shaping the agenda, articulating grassroots needs, and leading follow-up initiatives. Without a young civic sector, political agreements will struggle to permeate society and generate long-term impact.

7. Support for young women leaders: Regional networks should be developed for young women who are leading initiatives in the areas of reconciliation, community, education, entrepreneurship, and the prevention of radicalization. This support should include funding, training, professional guidance, international visibility, and mechanisms to protect against social and political barriers. Women’s leadership is one of the key drivers of civil society in the region.

8. Developing regional digital spaces for entrepreneurship and employment: It is vital to encourage the creation of regional digital platforms that enable youth to develop professional collaborations even when physical borders, visa restrictions, or political tensions make in-person meetings difficult. Such platforms can support entrepreneurship, remote work, professional training, knowledge exchange, and cross-border mentoring.

9. Using shared heritage as a tool for building trust: It is recommended to support educational and cultural projects that focus on shared heritage, regional history, community memory, and interfaith relations. The use of digital tools and advanced technologies, such as augmented reality and virtual reality (AR/VR), can help make complex historical narratives accessible, break down stereotypes, and foster a broader sense of regional belonging.

10. Adopting minilateral and flexible approaches: Given the political complexity of the Middle East, priority should be given to small, flexible coalitions of countries, cities, organizations, and communities centered around specific interests. Minilateral approaches allow progress to be made even when broad multilateral frameworks struggle to function, and provide practical space for creating focused, rapid, and actionable collaborations.

However, the research also shows that youth and youth organizations operate within a complex regional reality characterized by ongoing conflicts, closed borders, restrictions on movement, resource disparities, public mistrust, the politicization of collaborations, gender barriers and a lack of trust in institutions. In times of crisis, some organizations have been forced to operate under the radar, minimize public exposure, act discreetly, and sometimes shift the bulk of their activities to digital or informal spaces. Therefore, youth and youth organizations should not be viewed as a substitute for regional policy, institutions, or political agreements, but rather as a complementary and essential layer of action, capable of maintaining civil channels of communication even when formal channels are weakened.

In conclusion, the study's findings indicate that the new regionalism in the Middle East is shaped not only by political leaders, but also through civil society networks, professional initiatives, digital spaces, and cross-border collaborations led by youth. Youth organizations act as mediators between the local and the regional, between internal needs and external opportunities, and between abstract political vision and day-to-day action. In this sense, investing in these organizations is not merely an investment in the younger generation – important and necessary as that may be – but also an investment in the civic infrastructure necessary for long-term regional stability, resilience, and prosperity. If the 20th century in the Middle East was shaped primarily by states, armies, and ideologies, the 21st century is likely to be increasingly influenced by networks, connectivity, and cross-border civil society actors. In this reality, youth and youth organizations are not merely passive actors reacting to regional change, but active and even strategic partners in shaping it.

Research Team

The research was conducted by the strategic consulting firm **MIGDALOR Consulting**



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Einat Levi is an expert on Morocco and partnership-building in MENA, and co-founder of ViaCity, The Center for City Diplomacy. For over 15 years, she has been working to strengthen Israeli-Moroccan relations, and was a founding member of the Israeli Liaison Office in Rabat on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where she led the economic and academic affairs. A member of the Coalition for Regional Security and previously served as a strategic advisor to the Ministry of Regional Cooperation. In recognition of her unique contributions, she was honored with the "Coup de Coeur" Award (Choice of the Heart) by "Salam Forum" supported by the Moroccan Ministry of Culture and the "Knight of Peace" Award by the Peres Center for Peace and Innovation. Einat is a policy fellow at Mitvim Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, and an alumna of ISEF Foundation and Mandel Leadership Program in Jewish Culture.



Dr. Aicha Knidiri

Researcher

Aicha holds a PhD in Social Sciences, works at the intersection of research, project management, and learning design, primarily within the UN system. Her experience spans multiple thematic areas and regions, including Madagascar, Haiti, and the Mediterranean, where she has developed a practice grounded in contextual understanding, adaptability, and sensitivity to political and cultural dynamics. Aicha approaches research and program work as a space for mutual learning, where listening is central and knowledge is co-produced rather than delivered. Over the years, she has honed her ability to translate complex ideas into clear, actionable approaches, combining analytical rigor with collaborative practice in international settings.



Taha

BENJELLOUN

Research Analyst

Taha is a young professional in European Union affairs and international relations, with experience in Luxembourg and Brussels. He has also been involved in multiple regional partnership-building projects as an analyst at Migdalor Consulting, where he strengthened his commitment to cooperation as a pillar of peacebuilding. Beyond his institutional experience, Taha has been actively engaged in promoting interfaith dialogue and preserving Moroccan Jewish heritage in Morocco. Academically, Taha holds an MA in European Political and Governance Studies from the College of Europe in Bruges. Prior to that, he completed a Master 1 in Diplomatic Studies at Mohammed V University, as well as a BA in International Relations at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University.

Appendices

Appendix A:

List of Interviewees and Organizations Participating in the Study

1. Agil Shirinov, Rector of the Azerbaijan Institute of Theology (AIT), Azerbaijan.
2. Abdelhak El Kaokabi from the Mimouna Association, Morocco.
3. Soufiyan Saaoudi from YES – Youth Empowering Society, Morocco.
4. Aram Aqil, Co-Lead at Yekmal, Kurdish Diaspora, Germany.
5. Wissam Ziada from Taqadoum, East Jerusalem / Palestinian Authority.
6. George Stevens, International Projects Director and Salwa Abu-Kachef, Director of Arab Society at The Working and Learning Youth Movement (NOAL), Israel.
7. Mamoun Khreisat, Regional Coordinator at URI – United Religions Initiative MENA, Jordan.
8. Anonymous Interviewee.
9. Julian Harel, Teacher and Programs Coordinator at EcoPeace Middle East, Israel, Jordan and Palestine.
10. Anonymous Interviewee.

Appendix B: Table of Criteria for Mapping Youth Organizations

Criteria	Data Type	Description
OrgID	Unique ID	Unique identifier for each organization.
OrganizationName	Text	Full legal name of the organization.
Country	Text (Dropdown)	Country of primary operation.
City	Text	City of primary operation.
OrgType	Text (Dropdown)	Classification by structure/funding.
GeoScope	Text (Dropdown)	Geographical scope/level of operation.
PrimaryFocusArea	Text (Dropdown)	Main area of activity.
Target Audience	Text (Dropdown)	Specific youth demographic served.
OrgMission	Long Text	Brief statement of the organization's mission/vision.
YearFounded	Number	Year the organization was established.
AgeFocus	Yes/No	Is the organization's activity primarily focused on youth aged 18-40? (Yes/No).
YouthLed	Text (Dropdown)	Is the organization youth-led (majority leadership by youth) or does it have a defined youth arm? (Youth-Led / Defined Youth Arm / No).
ActivitiesIn6Months	Number	
StaffCount	Number	Approximate number of staff (including core volunteers).
Website	URL	Link to the organization's website.
SocialMediaLinks	URL	Links to key social media profiles (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn).
DirectorName	Text	Director's name.
OrgEmail	Text	Primary organizational email.
FundingSources	Text (Multi-select dropdown)	Main sources of funding.
IsCrossBorderInclined?	Text (Dropdown)	Is the organization explicitly interested in or already engaged in cross-border collaborations?
AbrahamAccordsRelevant?	Yes/No	Is the organization's activity or interest specifically related or influenced by the Abraham Accords?

Appendix C :

The Competency Model for Youth Diplomacy in the Middle East

Promoting cross-border cooperation in the Middle East relies not only on vision and a willingness to engage in dialogue, but also on a set of knowledge, skills, and personal and organizational competencies. In a region characterized by political complexity, multiple identities, cultural sensitivities, and uncertainty, youth and youth organizations require unique capabilities that enable them to build trust, mediate between groups and sustain regional partnerships over time.

The competency model presented in this appendix offers a framework for understanding the capabilities required to develop youth diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It draws on research findings, in-depth interviews, literature review and accumulated field experience built over years of working with civil society organizations, educational initiatives, institutions, and regional partners. This experience serves as a complementary layer to the empirical research and helps identify recurring patterns, capacity gaps, and essential competencies.

The model combines three levels: knowledge and understanding of the regional context; personal and interpersonal skills; and organizational capabilities that enable the transformation of isolated initiatives into sustainable frameworks of action. It does not offer a one-size-fits-all formula, but rather a flexible framework for developing training programs, strengthening organizations, and building sustainable regional partnerships.

Skill Cluster	Knowledge	Personal Skills	Organizational Competencies
1. Regional and International Geopolitical Literacy	• Modern political history of the region. • International and regional institutions (Arab League, African Union, United Nations). • Relevant governance systems, law, and regional and local norms. • Familiarity with conflicting historical narratives.	• Integrating local actors and their perspectives into regional discourse. • Identifying windows of opportunity, local needs and sensitive areas in the political landscape.	• Analyzing the impact of regional dynamics on local processes. • Applying complex thinking and an overarching understanding of governing systems. • Decision-making in complex political environments in MENA.
2. Inter-cultural Communication and Trust-Building	• Fundamental concepts in cultural differences. • Customs, traditions and cultures in the MENA region. • History of intergroup relations in the Middle East. • Awareness of stereotypes and intergroup encounters.	• Curiosity, active listening and creating a safe space for dialogue. • Managing culturally sensitive dialogue and maintaining awareness of personal biases. • Translating between narratives and bridging language and practice gaps.	• Gradual trust-building and maintaining cross-border relationships over time. • Developing protocols for managing formal multicultural encounters. • Implementing work procedures that ensure cultural sensitivity and privacy in the organization's publications and documents.

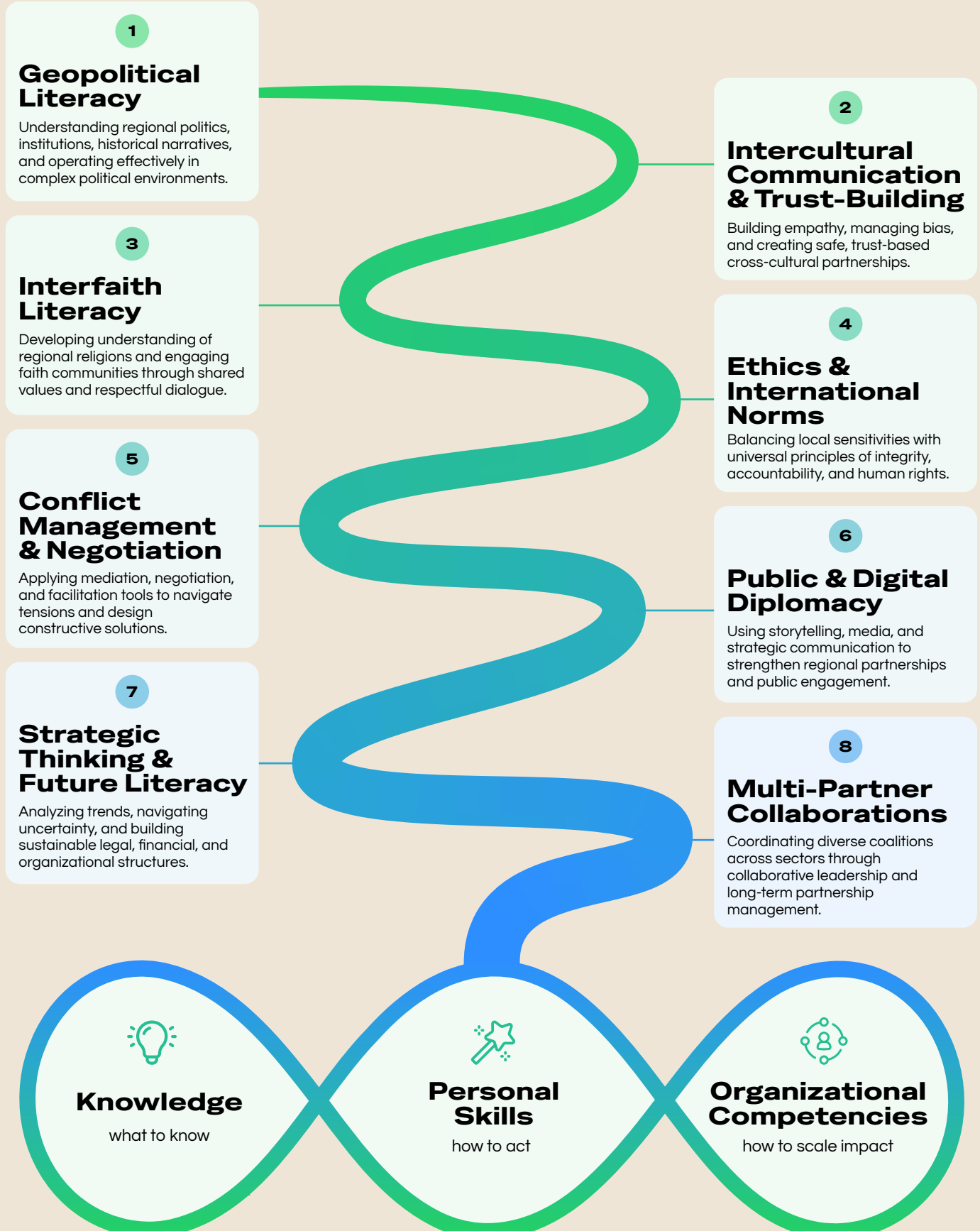
3. Interfaith Literacy	• Foundations of regional religions: Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and other religions. • Interfaith diplomacy, faith-based reconciliation models, and the roles of religious and community leadership in promoting reconciliation, peace, regionalism, and de-radicalization processes. • History of interfaith relations, including periods of conflict and coexistence.	• Facilitating dialogue in interfaith groups with sensitivity and theological proficiency. • Translating between religious narratives and bridging language and symbolism gaps.	• Identifying shared values and creating a foundation for interfaith cooperation. • Building relationships with religious leaders and communities, and integrating them into civil and regional initiatives. • Taking into account concrete diverse religious needs while planning activities: dietary restrictions, holidays, etc.
4. Ethics and International Norms	• Internationally agreed-upon human rights (UN Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and respect for privacy. • Codes of public and organizational ethics in MENA, including understanding differences in operating environments by country. • Accountability, compassion and solidarity. • Principles of integrity, fairness, and equality in partnerships.	• Value-based decision-making • Managing balance between privacy & transparency. • The ability to set boundaries, maintain integrity, and lead by personal example.	• Value-based decision-making • Managing balance between privacy & transparency. • The ability to set boundaries, maintain integrity, and lead by personal example.
5. Conflict Management and Negotiation	• Conflict management models. • Psychological barriers in conflict. • Mediation tools. • Multilateral diplomacy and escalation/de-escalation.	• Analyzing interests versus positions and creating potential agreements. • Identifying escalation triggers and techniques for de-escalating tensions.	• Leading mediation processes and facilitating multi-sided meetings (facilitation). • Developing win-win strategies and the ability to mediate among multiple actors. • Ability to compromise within organizational red lines.

6. Public Diplomacy and Digital Communication	• Understanding social media and its political influence. • Strategic storytelling. • Core concepts in public diplomacy. • Crisis communication management models. • Understanding of privacy and reputational concerns in communicating joint programming. • Knowledge of diplomatic structures (MFAs, embassies), visa requirements, etc.	• Formulating effective messages for diverse and changing audiences. • Situational awareness. • Creating common narratives when possible, envisioning future possibilities to promote trust and cooperation. • Ability to assertively yet gently represent positions	• Responsible and effective use of media to expand regional reach. • Understanding and utilizing the power of joint messaging and presentation. • Creating inter-organizational agreement on media & social media content. • Managing communication during a crisis and de-escalating tensions in the public arena. • Understanding when it is better to say nothing. • Mobilizing diplomatic partners to benefit the activity.
7. Strategic Thinking, Innovation, and Future Literacy	• Theory of social change and social innovation. • Budget management and resource development. • Tools for future thinking (scenarios, backcasting, horizon scanning). • Analysis of global trends.	• Developing creative solutions for regional challenges and linking disciplines. • Decision-making under conditions of uncertainty and integrating information from changing trends.	• Formulating a vision and long-term planning capabilities. • Managing foresight processes and generating future possibilities (scenarios). • Creating right frameworks (legal, financial) for successful regional collaborations • Building the right team and ensuring high level of personal investment.
8. Multi-Partner Collaborations	• Familiarity with stakeholder types, philanthropy, networks, forums, and other key actors in the Middle Eastern ecosystem. • Structure and characteristics of civil societies in the Middle East and North Africa. • Models for cross-sector collaboration. • Organizational skills (planning, evaluation, resource mobilization and fundraising).	• Inter-sectoral code-switching: the ability to adapt language and logic to bridge gaps between corporate, governmental, and civil-society mindsets. • Facilitative leadership: the ability to manage ego, share credit, and empower multiple autonomous partners ("Leading from behind"). • Tolerance for ambiguity; personal resilience and steadiness when navigating complex, evolving, and uncertain coalition dynamics.	• Building coalitions and maintaining inter-organizational relationships. • Coordination across sectors – public, private, and civil society. • Ability to define roles, boundaries, and joint working mechanisms. • Planning and implementing multi-partner projects and resource mobilization. • Ensuring the smooth functioning of all program aspects – programmatic, legal, financial, organizational, communications, etc.

Competency Model for Youth Diplomacy in MENA

Core Purpose

Cross-border cooperation in the MENA region requires youth and organizations to develop unique knowledge, skills, and institutional capacities to build trust and sustain partnerships amid political uncertainty. Based on regional research and field experience, this Model offers a practical framework built on eight dimensions, combining knowledge, skills, and competencies:



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