



مركز النهضة الاستراتيجي  
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## Redefining Participation:

Arab Youth Between Traditional Politics  
and New Forms of Activism



النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية  
Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development

Over the past five years, the Arab World has faced a series of multifaceted crises that have significantly impacted governance systems and legitimacy. These crises have led to a growing disillusionment among Arab youth and a decline in formal political engagement. This policy brief examines the factors contributing to this demobilization across three levels: international, regional, and national.

At the **international level**, global challenges such as climate change, economic instability, conflict, and the spread of misinformation have fueled frustration and disengagement. At the **regional level**, in addition to conflicts and insecurity, entrenched systemic issues, including corruption, the absence of long-term youth-focused policies, and the lack of spaces for expression and engagement, have further alienated young people. At the **national level**, Jordan serves as a case study to illustrate how these broader dynamics shape youth perceptions and civic participation within a specific country context.

In response to these challenges, young people have turned to informal activism, including digital engagement, community-based initiatives, and cultural resistance. This policy brief explores the potential and constraints of these alternative avenues, shedding light on how youth navigate restrictive political environments to assert their agency. Ultimately, it provides policy recommendations for governments, civil society, and youth to foster inclusive political participation and rebuild trust in governance structures.

## The Context of the Disillusionment

Over the past five years, a cascade of events in the region has severely tested its governance capacity, crisis management mechanisms, and institutional legitimacy. Despite the diverse internal and political dynamics of each country, common challenges - such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the genocide in Gaza, protracted conflicts in Lebanon and Yemen, and the collapse of the Syrian Regime - have produced transboundary repercussions, disproportionately impacting the lower-middle class and vulnerable groups such as youth, migrants, and women (Anis Ben Brik, 2024). Furthermore, many countries across the Arab world display common structural patterns, including a predominantly young population, high unemployment rates, particularly among women, and substantial external debt (except for Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates).

The COVID-19 pandemic not only deepened economic and healthcare crises - hitting low resource countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, as well as oil exporting economies such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (Hassan, 2021)- but further exposed government weaknesses in crisis management and public health responses, underscoring the urgent need for policy reforms.

Regimes have also leveraged the pandemic to consolidate power by implementing emergency measures, expanding surveillance, and securitizing public spaces. In many cases, the management of the pandemic and the declaration of the “state of emergency” reinforced technocratic approaches to problems that required political reform. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt introduced coercive measures related to surveillance cybersecurity, which neither reflect the needs of the population nor enhance government legitimacy (Sultan A., 2021).

These trends have deepened the frustration and disillusionment of Arab youth, amplifying a long-standing sense of dissatisfaction that has persisted since the aftermath of the Arab Revolutions. Youth represent about one-third of the population across the Arab World (Arab Barometer, 2019) and their role is crucial in driving societal change. Indeed, Arab youth have been at the forefront of

challenging the status quo and pushing for structural change through universities, street protests, and social media, as demonstrated during the Arab Revolutions. To fully understand their role in the post-revolutionary period however, it is important to adopt diverse analytical perspectives that can capture unconventional forms of political expression and the “daily practices of ordinary people” (Momani, 2023). Today, the Arab World holds the lowest levels of youth civic engagement worldwide (Robbins M., 2022). According to the 2021-2022 Arab Barometer report, in surveyed countries - Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia - most individuals aged 18-29 express little to no confidence in their governments or parliaments, while significantly higher levels of trust are placed in the military and police forces. Dissatisfaction with the education, economic, and healthcare systems has further reinforced skepticism about democracy’s effectiveness in delivering economic prosperity (in 2011, only 17% of respondents associated democracy with weak economic performance; by 2021, this figure had risen to 70%, indicating a clear shift in perception following the COVID-19 crisis). This dynamic can be attributed to the unique political-economic landscape of the Arab World region, where oil-rich countries exhibit both high GDP levels and some of the lowest global indicators for freedom of voice and accountability (VOA-Voices and Accountability Indicator), reinforcing the image of autocratic regimes as good in delivering economic stability and growth (Beschel, Dyer, and Schaider 2023).

As a result of this growing distrust, political disengagement is widespread. Young people across the region report low levels of interest in politics, with particularly high rates of disengagement in Algeria (57%), Egypt (78%), Iraq (59%), Jordan (64%), and Sudan (51%) (Arab Barometer, 2022). Voter turnout among youth remains low, with women generally participating even less than men. Youth disengagement risks deepening societal fragmentation and widening generational and socio-economic divides. Furthermore, a disengaged youth population may fail to resist democratic backsliding, creating conditions that further entrench authoritarian tendencies.

## What Drives Arab Youth’s Disillusionment with Governments and Civic Engagement?

In the MENA region, youth political engagement faces multiple barriers, ranging from political, social, and cultural norms to policy-related issues. These obstacles are further exacerbated by international and regional challenges, as well as the national specificities of each country. On the international dimension, climate change and geopolitical instability placed additional strain on the region’s already complex political and economic landscape. At the regional level, the absence of long-term development policies and initiatives targeting youth, limited public spaces for engagement, and corruption hinder youth participation. In addition to international and regional challenges, each country should be considered in relation to its unique political context and governance structure.

### International Challenges

One of the most pressing international challenges for the region is **climate change**. In recent years, extreme weather events, including unprecedented heatwaves, rising sea levels, and flash floods, have led to mass displacement and heightened food insecurity, particularly in rural areas of North Africa, such as the coastal regions of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and the Nile Delta. Water scarcity remains a critical issue, with 10 out of the 18 most water-stressed countries globally located in MENA (Wehrey and Fawal, 2022). The socio-economic implications of climate change exacerbate existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups. Despite growing youth awareness and concern about

climate change, as evidenced by the latest Arab Barometer survey (2023-2024), governments and elites often downplay its impact, sidelining youth voices in climate policy discussions. While some countries have initiated adaptation strategies, progress remains slow, particularly in meeting international commitments such as the Paris Agreement, highlighting the urgent need for climate accountability and equitable resource distribution.

**Geopolitical instability**, armed conflicts, and violence since the COVID-19 pandemic have further undermined youth engagement by both fostering large-scale forced displacement and migration and exacerbating the likelihood of vulnerable people. Protracted conflicts and violence have shrunk economic and education opportunities and, thus, civic participation. Indeed, a clear correlation between socioeconomic status and civic participation exists, as disengagement appears to be most prevalent among those with lower levels of education, who experience heightened inequality and alienation. The percentage of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET) ranges between 25% and 30% in several MENA countries (ILO, 2022), forcing young people to prioritize economic survival over political participation.

**Misinformation, digital divides** - especially affecting women - and **limitations on freedom of expression** also hinder active civic participation. While technology has the potential to foster democratic engagement, restrictions in access to valuable information and the limitation of digital rights further hinder youth engagement. Social media can be understood as “escape rooms” or spaces where individuals can “advance political causes that are difficult to advance offline” (Howard, 2011, p. 145). However, a large proportion of users remain passive (Arab Barometer Survey 2023–2024), largely due to growing restrictions on freedom of expression online. Acting as a double-edged sword, social media are both promoting and limiting spaces of political expression. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the perception of social media as free spaces was limited, and since the outbreak of genocide in Gaza, surveillance practices have intensified, particularly on Meta-owned platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram). This has led to self-censorship, as individuals fear repercussions for expressing their opinions (Human Rights Watch, 2023, 7Amleh).

## Regional Challenges

In addition to international challenges, countries in the MENA region share similar structural barriers to youth political engagement. Widespread corruption is often mentioned as one of the most pressing obstacles to political participation; nearly 90% of youth perceive high levels of corruption within their countries (AB, 2023-2024). Secondly, the inadequacy of policy regarding youth participation appears to be a common challenge. After the so-called Arab Spring, as a response to youth-driven advocacy for comprehensive reforms, several Arab countries have attempted to institutionalize youth representation and coordinate policies across government sectors, forming youth national strategies, prioritizing economic, social, and political focus areas according to the nation’s unique socio-political context and governance structures. In this sense, similarities can be traced between countries' contexts: while Lebanon, Libya, and Algeria prioritize economic stability for youth, considering the economic situation, Jordan and Bahrain tend to foster social cohesion, while Palestine’s strategy involves more political aspects (Anis Ben Brik, 2024). Many Arab countries have created National Youth Councils or Youth Ministries, seemingly a positive step toward improved governance. Nevertheless, the implementation of these strategies remains fragmented, with youth governance structures often operating with limited political influence and resources. These institutions frequently lack decision-making power, raising questions about their effectiveness and legitimacy (UNDP, 2023).

## The Case of Jordan

To ground these broader dynamics in a specific context, the following section explores youth engagement in Jordan as a case country.

Jordan was the first MENA country to develop a National Youth Strategy in 2004. Further promoted in 2019, the Strategy (2019-2025) was launched by the Ministry of Youth and overseen by the Higher Council for Youth, which coordinates policies across sectors and reports directly to the Prime Minister. For the first time, young people were directly involved in the royal committee established by King Abdullah II to modernize the political system. Many reforms were implemented in the past year to encourage youth participation in the political sphere. According to new party regulations, at least 10% of a party's founding membership must be composed of women and young people, increasing to 20% after three years and a minimum age. In 2024, the minimum age for candidacy has been lowered to further encourage youth participation.

Despite these reforms, Jordan is grappling with a record-low voter turnout, with only 32% of eligible voters casting their ballots in the 2024 elections, a stark decline from the 57% turnout recorded in 2013. No substantial investments were made in strengthening the Ministry of Youth to ensure its sustainable governance structures (Anis Ben Brik, 2024), nor has a national body been created, as seen in many OECD countries, where national youth councils serve as an official mechanism for youth representation. In practice, there is a noticeable gap between theory and implementation. For example, although Jordan's climate adaptation strategies recognize youth as a vulnerable group, they fail to provide concrete mechanisms for their active participation (OECD Report, 2022).

While political commitment and policymaking are pivotal for achieving youth-responsive outcomes, their mere existence does not necessarily translate into meaningful youth political participation. It is important to consider additional factors that may drive disengagement, such as socioeconomic conditions and cultural norms. High unemployment rates, reaching almost 50 percent of Jordanian youth, may lead young people to prioritize economic survival over political participation (UNICEF Jordan, 2022). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Jordanian civil society has been impacted both economically, with higher unemployment rates, and socially, with new regulations that restricted public gatherings and limited access to public spaces. In recent years, civil society organizations have also faced increased constraints due to more restrictive funding approval processes, which have contributed to the shrinking of civic space (ARDD, 2023). Meanwhile, universities have played a limited role in fostering political awareness or addressing the post-Arab Spring challenges, further deepening the political disengagement among youth (Safa, 2020). Finally, despite the increased political presence of women in the country, prevailing cultural norms continue to impose limitations on their participation in political processes (Kvinna, 2021).

## Alternative Forms of Political Participation

In the wake of widespread political demobilization, examining forms of political participation beyond traditional avenues such as voting, protesting, and party affiliation is essential. While conventional political engagement has declined, alternative and less visible modes of activism have emerged at the international, regional, and national levels. These include forms of “**latent participation**” (Erik Amna,

2012<sup>1</sup>), which consist of pre-political actions such as informal civic activities, volunteering, community organizing, and participation in social movements. Unlike passive disengagement, characterized by apathy toward political and social issues, latent participation can eventually influence politics and societal change.

**At the international level**, digital activism has opened up new frontiers and spaces of political and social engagement. Symbolic online actions, such as hashtag campaigns and virtual petitions, have been instrumental in raising awareness worldwide, promoting democratic ideals and exposing government repression (Smith, 2022). Since COVID-19, forms of Civil disobedience, especially concerning climate justice, and boycotting have also gained momentum all around the globe. Women have been at the forefront of struggles, creating solidarity networks and raising awareness about sexual abuse and harassment, inspiring hundreds of movements around the world (#NiUnaMenos, #MeToo, #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatters).

**At the regional level**, different informal social movements have emerged in response to governance gaps and socio-economic challenges without being directly involved in political actions. Many scholars used the term “**apolitical activism**” in relation to the post-Arab Revolutions that prioritized development-oriented and community-based actions over direct political confrontation. It can be argued that these actions, while not directly confronting the state, implicitly challenge it by addressing unmet needs and presenting alternative models of governance. Operating in highly localized contexts, these movements have focused on social justice, education, and economic empowerment and they prefer to remain detached from the political sector. This choice is very much connected to the perception of the youth of political spaces like spaces of corruption, detached from the real needs of the population. In places like Algeria, for example, the concept of politics remains associated with the negative experiences of the civil war and the *décennie noire* or Black Decade. This apolitical definition is also preserving the movement by guaranteeing more room for action, as they are not seen as direct challengers of the governments (Rennick, 2019).

In countries like Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria and Algeria as well, many initiatives were born with a focus on cultural and social interventions, such as participation in Syrian local administrative councils to coordinate humanitarian relief and essential services, volunteer-led neighborhood beautification projects in underprivileged areas of Lebanese cities, and the establishment of Slow Food initiatives in rural and semi-urban Egypt (Rennick, 2019). Such movements aimed to support marginalized communities and foster grassroots collaboration, deliberately avoiding state institutions or formal political engagement, while at the same time recreating new organizational forms and processes. Cultural movements, to a certain extent, can also be considered alternative forms of activism and resistance. New genres of music and street art are used to express dissent, for example, in Egypt and Tunisia, without being explicitly involved with political authorities. In Morocco, Young football club supporters have also taken the role of complex social actors operating in the society; by using unconventional forms of political participation, they offer services to the community that go well beyond football clubs (Yousfi, 2024). Reflecting a global trend, online participation has also played a significant role in the region. Acting as a space for counter-narration, advocacy, and mobilization,

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<sup>1</sup> While youth across the region are often labeled as politically disengaged, it is important to distinguish between **passive disengagement** and what scholars term **latent participation**. Passive disengagement refers to apathy or indifference toward political and social issues, where individuals consciously choose not to participate. In contrast, latent participation describes a more subtle and informal form of engagement - one that does not manifest through traditional political channels like voting or protesting but still reflects awareness, concern, and a readiness to act under the right conditions. This can include involvement in volunteer work, community organizing, or cultural expression, which may evolve into more visible forms of political participation over time.

digital platforms bridge local issues to global movements. Activists and civil society organizations have been using social media both to amplify advocacy campaign, such as The Syrian Campaign, which advocates for the human rights of the Syrian people, and to reclaim spaces through digital archive, like the Nakba Archive. Social media has also played a key role in advancing the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement during the ongoing Gaza genocide, raising awareness and promoting alternative products as tools for resistance.

However, these alternative movements have their limitations. According to the latest Arab Barometer data, only 10% of young people in the Arab world regularly engage in organized groups, with about 20% participating in volunteer initiatives. Lebanon, Algeria, and Sudan report the highest levels of youth involvement in social movements, with charitable activities being the most common. This data highlights the weaknesses of alternative forms of political participation, as these movements often lack formal recognition and are constrained by limited resources and government restrictions. In addition, they can be translated into a certain degree of isolation, as people have not always developed a collective vision of change. In other words, they risk remaining more related to responding to specific local needs rather than providing actual reform changes.

In other words, while these new forms of engagement among Arab youth activists demonstrate their ability to act as alternative methods for contestation and participation, the longer-term impact and ability to stimulate broader changes to political practices remain to be seen.

**The case of Jordanian youth** exemplifies this broader regional trend, favoring unconventional forms of political engagement, such as volunteering and boycotting, over traditional methods of political participation. A 2021 survey found that 29% of Jordanian youth frequently participated in civic activities, including initiatives supporting vulnerable communities and promoting environmental sustainability (FES MENA Youth Study, March 2023). In recent years, environmental awareness has grown in Jordan, accompanied by an increase in both private and non-governmental climate organizations (such as the activist group “Green Iris Jo”). However, it is important to note that despite a rising interest in environmental issues, when asked to assess the importance of climate action in comparison to other concerns, many Jordanian youths prioritized economic stability and job opportunities (FES MENA Youth Study, March 2023), pointing out the correlation between economic possibilities and political participation.

Although data from the Arab Barometer (2023–2024) indicates that most Jordanian youths do not use social media for political purposes, young activists continue to rely on digital campaigns to organize protests and advocate for social change. Hashtag movements have played a significant role in mobilizing Jordanian activists - for instance, in 2018, the hashtag **#Maanash** (meaning “we don’t have the money”) was used to protest amendments to the Income Tax Law, while in 2019 the feminist campaign **#Talaat** (“stepping out”) raised awareness about violence against women. Women have been increasingly participating in digital (and non-digital) activism. In the digital sphere, pages like the “Feminist movement in Jordan” have been raising awareness on important topics, such as female labor rights and sexual harassment, actively asking for reform change. Over the past years, movements in solidarity with Palestine have also used social media as a critical tool for coordination and mobilization, such as organizing protests or calling for boycotts. However, a more cautious engagement in online political discourse in the last years (according to AB, only 7% of Jordanian youth use social media for political participation) can be partially attributed to Jordan’s 2023 Cybercrime Law, which has imposed significant restrictions on freedom of expression, contributing to an atmosphere of self-censorship among activists and the wider public (Amnesty

International, 2023). By effectively criminalizing speech against public officials, the law is shrinking civic space, particularly the right to freedom of expression and access to information. As a result, self-censorship may bias the types of information circulating online, allowing only pre-approved groups to discuss certain topics.<sup>2</sup>

In the last years, the most used alternative form of political participation among Jordanian youth has been boycotting. 67% of youth have refrained from purchasing specific brands as a means of expressing political and social discontent with products connected to the BDS Movements, with a tangible impact on the urban representation and economy of the country. Over the past two years, Jordanian youth have also increasingly returned to the streets. While only 3% reported participating in protests between October 2021 and July 2022, this figure rose to 20% between September 2023 and July 2024. A significant driver of this increase can be related to the genocide in Gaza, which has mobilized university students across the country to take to the streets.

## Recommendations

Youth participation in civic and political life across the MENA region is constrained by economic hardship, political repression, displacement, and the shrinking of civic space. Despite these challenges, youth continue to explore alternative forms of engagement, including volunteering, cultural expression, and digital activism. However, these efforts often remain fragmented, underfunded, and disconnected from policymaking.

To move toward a more inclusive and participatory civic space, the following recommendations are offered:

### To Governments and Legislators

- **Institutionalize Youth Participation:** Create structured and inclusive mechanisms - such as national and local youth councils, advisory boards, and civic committees - to ensure that youth are meaningfully involved in governance processes, from agenda-setting to policy evaluation.
- **Ensure Representation in Political Structures:** Promote youth representation through quota systems or voluntary targets in legislative bodies, municipal councils, and political party lists to enhance age diversity in governance.
- **Expand and Protect Civic Space:** Repeal or amend laws that restrict freedom of expression, assembly, and digital participation. Enforce legal protections for youth activists, journalists, and civil society organizations.
- **Invest in Civic Education:** Strengthen democratic and civic education in schools and out-of-school programs to equip youth with knowledge of their rights, responsibilities, and tools for democratic engagement.
- **Engage Youth in Global Policy Agendas:** Involve young people in the formulation and implementation of policies on climate change, biodiversity, digital governance, and social

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<sup>2</sup> According to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), that Jordan ratified, restriction of freedom of speech can be used, proportionately, only to achieve a legitimate aim, such as the protection of national security, public order or public health.



inclusion. Youth should not only be consulted but also have decision-making roles in national climate strategies and international negotiations.

## To Civil Society Organizations and Academia

Given the limited youth use of social media for direct political action and the persistence of passive engagement online, civil society should prioritize digital literacy, safe online expression, and creative engagement strategies

- **Support Youth-Led and Grassroots Initiatives:** Provide sustained funding, mentorship, capacity-building, and visibility to youth-run organizations and informal movements working on community development, cultural expression, and political education.
- **Expand Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Civic Dialogue:** Create both physical and digital platforms where youth can gather, debate, and strategize around shared concerns, particularly in contexts where formal political avenues are restricted.
- **Foster Intergenerational and Cross-sectoral Dialogue:** Facilitate structured engagement between youth and political leaders, community stakeholders, academics, and policymakers to promote mutual understanding and collaborative action.
- **Promote Women-Sensitive Approaches:** Design and implement leadership and civic training specifically tailored to young women, addressing the structural and cultural barriers that limit their public participation.
- **Enhance Youth-led Research and Knowledge Production:** Engage youth in participatory research, citizen science, and data collection initiatives that inform public policies and reflect grassroots perspectives.
- **Strengthen Digital Citizenship:** Offer training on digital security, countering misinformation, and using technology for advocacy, especially for marginalized groups disproportionately impacted by the digital divide.

## To Youth:

- **Promote formal and non-formal grassroots initiatives:** Take an active role in shaping a new culture of political participation that promotes community engagement and reflects the diverse needs of the societies.
- **Advocate for inclusive environments:** Advocate against all forms of legal, social, and economic discrimination, especially those targeting women. This is essential for advancing inclusive laws and ensuring equitable access to opportunities and resources for all members of society.
- **Strengthen collective thinking and critical awareness:** Work towards developing shared perspectives and a deeper understanding of existing models, policies, and legislation.

- **Enhance regional and international connections:** Establish connections with civil society initiatives, research groups, and universities throughout the region and globally, to strengthen collaboration and exchange of ideas.

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