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Youth engagement in Syria:
Expected – but not encouraged

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Based on a sample survey of 1050 Syrian university youth, this report examines youth participation at home, in the university and in their surrounding communities. To frame and structure the analysis of this participation, this report examines the construction of 'ideal youth' by post-colonial states, neo-liberalism's 'active citizenship' strategy, and the literature on civic youth engagement. While 'social responsibility' is a cornerstone of Syria's 'social market economy' reforms where citizens are increasingly expected to rely on themselves, this report finds that in practice: youth participation in public is rather low; and youth are often discouraged from public participation either directly by their families or indirectly by environments which do not facilitate and encourage their participation. At home, over 70% of youth participate frequently or most of the time in deliberations and decision-making processes about their own lives; however, one quarter of youth participate only occasionally or seldom in these processes. In stark contrast, 80% of Syrian youth seldom, if ever, participate in extra-curricular activities. Low social trust amongst youth, combined with the closeness of youth organizations to the state and the lack of a civic ethos or environment in the university (where a broader commitment to the polity might develop), were stated as key deterring factors.

Introduction

This brief report provides highlights from a sample survey of Syrian university youth on their perspectives for the future[1]. The survey was conducted in May 2008[2] in partnership with the Faculty of Arts at Damascus University[3] and stemmed from a shared interest in conducting empirical research on Syrian youth. For the purposes of the survey, 'youth' were defined[4] as being between 17 and 30 years of age and were registered students at the university (n=1050) including both undergraduate and graduate students from the various faculties, departments and academic and applied programs. Given the paucity of empirical studies of Syrian youth, this survey[5] provides important perspectives and insights on youth issues in Syria from the standpoint of youth themselves (even though the university youth surveyed are not representative of the overall Syrian youth population). This report also is a contribution to the literature on youth and social participation in the Arab World. The decision to focus on university students stemmed from both practical, operational considerations[6] and from an interest in university students as representatives of elites and/or future elite groups.

This report begins by discussing the discursive construction of 'ideal youth' through the neo-liberal-influenced lens of 'active citizenship', followed by a review of the literature on youth civic engagement to identify the main factors affecting youth participation. Secondly, the structural forces and general trends which affect Arab youth and structure and shape many of their major life choices as they navigate the youth-to-adult transition are presented. In the second half of this report, relevant survey findings are presented and discussed in light of these key factors. The aim of the second half of the report is to examine the degree of personal liberty accorded to youth by and within one of the main social institutions, the family. This part of the report discusses the degree to which Syrian social institutions actually allow and encourage youth to play an active role[7] in the society by examining the degree to which they are able to participate in those social institutions.

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[1] While this web report provides highlights of the survey findings, it should, however, be noted that the survey data is available in Tabulation Reports in both English and in Arabic on Fafo's website at: http://www.fafo.no/ais/middeast/syria/syrianuniversityyouth/index.html

[2] Fafo would like to thank the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for its support in making this survey possible.

[3] The survey questionnaire was developed collaboratively with a group of professors at Damascus University and where possible, drew on and integrated relevant questions from other surveys.

[4] While there is a rich and vast literature on the construction, varying definitions and emergence on the concept of 'youth,' I will not engage here in this theoretical debate. Note also that I will draw from the literature on youth and youth civic engagement where the age limits used to define youth do fluctuate and are sometimes as broad as 13 to 35 years of age. The United Nations for statistical purposes defines 'youth' as "those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/qanda.htm

[5] The questionnaire was organized into sections on: youth's participation and key constraints in decision-making; values; university studies; participation in extra-curricular and leisure activities; work life, the economy and the future; and standard background biographical questions.

[6] One consideration related to the institutional capacity of our partners to run a large-scale, multi-site national survey.

[7] Note that although I use refer to 'active citizenship' and the literature on youth civic engagement to problematize and unpack some of the survey findings, my intention here is not to promote 'active citizenship' or neo-liberalism but to examine which types of citizenship and youth subjectivities are being (re)produced.

Constructing 'Ideal Youth'

Modern states, in their efforts to socially and politically reproduce the nation, seek to produce citizens and youth who are responsible and amenable to self-governance, as well as being bearers of national values and identity (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005, 36). Elite groups play a central role in constructing such discourses and discursive formations of 'ideal citizens'.

Youth in Syria and in other countries in the region are exposed to and socially regulated by various competing discourses and 'ideal youth' constructions[8]. Swedenburg has demonstrated some of the historical development in these discourses and 'ideal' constructions over the past few decades, ranging from agents of 'progress' and modernity following independence to 'vulnerable innocents' in need of guidance and protection in the form of a 'Daddy state' from such 'corrupting' influences as media, Western consumption patterns, Westernization and globalization to Islamism and Islamist extremism (Swedenburg, 2007, 5).

More recently, the discursive construction of 'ideal youth' in Syria has been influenced by neo-liberalism and neo-liberalism's 'active citizenship' strategy but first I will define these terms. Neo-liberalism may be defined as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, 2). Creating and maintaining such an institutional framework is viewed as the state's role. Neo-liberal governments frequently employ a strategy of 'active citizenship' to regulate the population through community participation[9], which involves both marginalizing the role of the state (particularly in the provision of social entitlements) and neglecting a number of other governmental activities. In the process, "new citizen subjectivities and structural changes in the nature of political governance" are created (Marinetto, 2003, 108). Active citizenship has often been promoted as a means of fostering greater responsibility amongst citizens for both the direct provision and management of public and welfare services (particularly when state-sponsored provisions are being dismantled).

Syria's five-year plan, which expires in 2010, commits the country to reforms designed to move the country towards a 'social market economy' which as a reform package remains rather vague[10]. However, the principles of 'equal opportunities' and 'social responsibility' are stated as being two of the cornerstones.[11] For the purposes of this discussion of 'active citizenship', identifying 'social responsibility' amongst citizens as a cornerstone is relevant (although further discourse analysis of

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[8] See, for instance, Islah Jad's (2005) work on the construction of the 'ideal Palestinian woman' or Jay Straker's work (2009) on the construction of 'ideal Guinean youth'.

[9] Marinetto notes, however, that the adoption of active citizenship by various governments has not led to an actual redistribution of political power, nor to the emergence of "citizen-centered government" (Marinetto, 2003, 118).

[10] While the five-year plan identifies measures for reducing poverty, introducing safety nets and creating jobs, other important measures remain vague. The idea of a social market economy in Syria involves balancing between the market regime on the one hand and the welfare regime and social development on the other (Nehme, 2006, 3). For a more in-depth presentation of what these economic reforms entail, see Kjetil Selvik's "It's the Mentality, Stupid: Syria's Turn to the Private Sector," in Aurora Sottimano and Kjetil Selvik's *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria.* Lynne Rienner, 2008.

[11] Stephanie Reiher and Ronny Bechmann. "Syria in search of a paradigm." In *Development and Cooperation*. Vol. 50 No. 03. March 2009. www.inwent.org/ez/articles/092447/index.en.shtml

the term is needed). Frequently, in presenting the 'social market economy' concept, Syrian reformers emphasize and characterize citizens' roles as one of self-reliance:

> The concept of the social market economy must not be equated with comprehensive state social welfare programmes … the term 'social market economy' implies the establishment of an economic system in which economic activities are fashioned in such a way so as to allow people to take care of themselves …[12]

Neo-liberal ideology and the 'active citizenship' governance strategy have seeped into public debates and spaces in the Middle East. Internationally-sponsored workshops, seminars and projects in the region have been organized to promote various types of community participation under a host of terms, such as: 'voluntarism', 'civic engagement', 'citizen involvement', 'active citizenship', and 'responsible citizens'.[13] There have also been calls for Syrian youth to become 'more engaged' in their communities [14] through volunteer work which has even been posited by some Syrians as 'the highest form of citizenship' (Barkawi, 2008). Against this changing discursive backdrop, this survey sought to uncover some of youth's own desires, wishes and imaginaries. Neyzi, a scholar on Turkish youth, suggests caution regarding whose representation of youth is operating: "In studying youth, it is important to distinguish the definition and representation of youth from above, such as by power holding adults, from the ways in which young persons view and represent themselves. It is the former which tends to dominate the field." (2005, 107).

While it may be premature to assess the shifting terrain of political governance, youth identity formation and neo-liberal influences in Syria, this survey sought in part to understand the degree of personal liberty[15] accorded to Syrian youth by their families[16] both to participate in extra-curricular activities and in deliberations and decision-making processes about major life decisions. However, before examining what Syrian youth respondents indicated, the next section will examine some of the key trends and structural forces which shape the lives of Arab and Syrian youth.

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[12] "Q & A with Abdullah Al-Dardari, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs" in *Syria Today*. Dec. 2009. http://www.hse.ru/data/994/481/1225/Oct 28 corporate governance and csr.pdf

[13] See, for instance, Lacey and Ilcan (2006) on international development non-governmental organizations being increasingly implicated in assembling volunteers as 'responsible citizens.' Take, for example, one of the outcomes from a regional research project, which aimed to create "An advocacy campaign aimed at promoting active citizenship in the region" (see "NGOs, Gendered Social Entitlements and Active Citizenship: Shaping Future Policies in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine." http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-85593-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html). See also Queen Rania's opening speech at a 2007 World Economic Forum session promoting 'civic engagement' and philanthropy in the Middle East (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Odw2oQLaMQ8.

[14] Note that such calls are problematic in a number of ways ; for instance, they betray both a lack of recognition and appreciation of the regulatory environment – namely, that in many countries in the region, there have been laws for a few decades against free association of citizens criminalizing citizen mobilization and action.

[15] By 'personal liberty' of youth here, I refer to the liberty of a youth to exercise his or her will freely except for those restraints imposed by the youth's parents and/or extended family to safeguard the physical, moral, political, and economic welfare of the youth. This working definition was modified from a definition of 'personal liberty' from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/personal+liberty).

[16] While the social power of Arabic families in the Middle East has been affected by processes of modernization, Arabic families are not only a central locus of social life, but have socialized children and youth, transmitted basic values and norms, provided social security and economic protection (Meijer, 2000, 1).

Arab Youth and the Transition to Adulthood

Due to the limited number of empirical studies on Syrian youth mentioned earlier, I will use some of the literature on Arab youth to draw out the general socio-economic and political trends which shape their lives and life choices; where possible, the literature specific to Syrian youth will be referenced.

The youth-to-adult transition, or in the case of educated youth, the 'school-to-work-to-marriage' transition[17] in the Arab World, is generally viewed as occurring when one: finds regular employment or garners stable income or a livelihood; saves funds for housing and getting married; secures housing and furnishings; and marries and establishes one's own household. Youth throughout the Arab world have, however, been delaying this transition for a variety of social and economic reasons, which vary somewhat from one country to the next (Singerman, 2007). Diane Singerman has coined the term 'wait adulthood' or 'waithood' to refer to youth enduring "prolonged adolescence and remaining single for long periods of time while trying to save money to marry" (Singerman, 2007, 6). The notion refers not only to the consequences of delayed marriage and to the mixed feelings about an extended period of parental dependence, but also suggests 'waiting' to negotiate one's identity within the broader nationalist, political, religious, developmentalist and neo-liberal discourses which shape the constructions of desirable youth.

Socially and culturally, Arab youth become adults through marriage. However, there has been a trend throughout most of the Arab World of delaying the age at first marriage, and Syria is no exception (Rashad et al., 2005 quoted in Kabbani and Kamel, 2007, 32)[18]. This trend is, in fact, quite problematic in a region where "early and universal marriage had been the norm and sexuality had been linked to marriage" (Singerman, 2007, 5). By exploring youth's perspectives on the future, the survey contributes to better understanding empirically some of Syrian youth's views as they are in the midst of this major life transition.

Meijer (2000) describes the challenging socio-economic and political bind which Arab young people find themselves in as being 'a difficult triangle.' Arab youth are caught between the demographics of the 'youth bulge,'[19] their own increased expectations resulting from modernity and the pursuit of higher education, and from the decreasing number of stable public sector jobs. While the modern Arab state offered educational opportunities to youth in the post-independence period, the social contract between the state and youth who pursued higher education has been for many years that stable, decently-paid public sector jobs will await graduates (Singerman, 2007, 35). For many years, the public sector played an important role in integrating young graduates into the labor force and

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[17] Singerman argues that in light of the high costs of marriage across the Arab world and the long periods of time households need to accumulate these resources, that researchers and policy-makers consider the costs of marriage through the lens of political economy and in terms of the various related effects; she coins the term 'school-to-work-to-marriage' to describe this life transition. (Singerman, 2007).

[18] See Hoda Rashad, Magued Osman and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi's 2005 policy brief, *Marriage in the Arab World* for the Population Reference Bureau.

[19] According to Kabbani and Kamel, Syria is also experiencing a demographic wave and has created a 'youth bulge.' In 2005, Syria's youth population peaked at 25.4 percent, presenting challenges in terms of job creation for young people (2007, 5). For a thorough discussion of the 'youth bulge' and the current demographic situation in the region, see Youssef Courbage's (2000) "The Demographic Inflection of the Southern Mediterranean: Reasons for Optimism" in Roel Meijer's (ed.) *Alienation or Integration of Arab Youth: Between Family, State and the Street.* Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, pp. 27-43.

facilitated their passage into adult life. Structural adjustment programs which reduced the size of public spending, combined with the demographic 'youth bulge' and the entry of more and more young, educated women into the work force, have led to high rates of youth unemployment.

The Government of Syria has implemented a package of reforms which has reduced public expenditure relative to per capita public spending at a time when the proportion of the youth population has been peaking. In 2002, Syrian youth's unemployment rates were 28 percent for 15-19 year olds and 25 percent for those aged 20 to 24 (Kabbani and Kamel, 2007, 17). These rates may be "high compared to the world average of 14 percent but not high compared to the region's average of 26 percent" (ibid, 19). There are, however, gender and generational disparities in employment and unemployment rates: "young women in Syria are less than half as likely to participate in the labor force compared to young men (30 versus 67 percent) and nearly twice as likely to be unemployed (39 versus 21 percent)" (ibid, 6).

In light of the challenges facing Syrian youth as they navigate the transition into adulthood, the survey delved into their concerns vis-à-vis future employment and economic prospects, as well as their plans and imaginaries following graduation and preferences in terms of sector of work. This interest stems in part from issues of youth exclusion and marginalization which are emerging as important political issues and policy areas in the region due in part to the dynamic demographic situation and to the changing nature of relations between the state and its citizens.

Factors influencing Youth Civic Engagement

Based on a review of literature on youth civic engagement, this section of the report presents some of the key factors organized thematically from that review. While 'civic engagement' by definition refers to both community involvement[20] and political voice (Zani and Cicognani, 2009), this literature is drawn on mainly out of an interest with the former and because it relates specifically to youth. That being said, one of the challenges with this literature is that culturally-speaking, the "[c]oncepts and detailed analyses available now are profoundly American" (Vinken, 155). However, less is known about how youth engagement in societies with other forms of political governance.

In a policy paper by Flanagan and Faison which focused on youth civic engagement[21], one key implication of the research for social policy and programmes was the importance of creating and maintaining inclusive public spaces for all youth (Flanagan and Faison, 2001, 1). However, the authors also pointed out that promoting values which focus on self enhancement rather than one's connection to broader public interests, will mean that "young people will be less aware that the exercise of rights implies obligations to the community. In such a situation, social trust, the glue of Civil Society, will be undermined" (ibid). I have reappropriated Flanagan and Faison's (2001)

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[20] Zani and Cicognani also point out that there are different forms of social participation amongst youth, namely: political participation, civic participation, alternative or non-convention forms of participation (such as participating in boycotts, ethical consumption practices, participating in blogs and chat rooms), and school participation (Zani and Cicognani, 2009, 2).

[21] While the terms 'civic' and 'political' have different connotations today, they share similar historical roots. The Latin root *'civis'* refers to a citizen, while the Greek equivalent *'polites'* referred to a member of the polity (Walzer, 1989 quoted in Flanagan and Faison, 2001, 3). By 'civic' I refer to the broader range of meanings related to citizens, citizenship and community affairs.

framework on the factors which affect youth civic engagement and will focus specifically on the following because of their relevance to Syrian youth.

- Family practices: in particular, the communications and engagement practices of parents vis-à-vis their children;
- Social trust: that is, the belief on the part of youth that 'most people are generally fair and helpful', along with social trust's link to youth's connection to the community or polity (ibid, 3);
- Spaces and practices within the university: the degree to which university spaces are inclusive for youth, including openness to differing opinions, values and positions, as well as space and voice for youth to define group goals. The degree to which educators, professors and other staff practice, model and exemplify civic behavior inside the classroom and on campus. Support for the polity and its principles can come through proximal authority figures like teachers, school administrators, coaches and so on as youth learn to accept the most distal authority of the state as legitimate and binding (ibid, 5).
- Participation in extra-curricular activities: whether at school and non-formal youth organizations "offers young people opportunities to explore what it means to be a member of 'the public,' and to work out the reciprocity between rights and obligations in the meaning of citizenship." (ibid., 7)

In the next section, the survey findings will be presented under these four groupings or headings.

Syrian University Youth and the Factors and Conditions for their Engagement

Using the factors and conditions for civic youth engagement identified in the last section, this part of the report serves to frame and unpack Syrian youth's social participation, as well as to consider Syrian youth participation rates against the environment which fosters such participation. Each of the four modified headings which affect civic youth engagement is used to structure the presentation of relevant survey findings and discussion.

Family Practices

With respect to family and parental practices of communicating and engaging with one's children (and in this case, with children who are young adults), Syrian youth were asked about the frequency with which they participate in key discussions about their own lives in their families. Youth responded as follows: 42% most of the time; 28% frequently; 24% occasionally; 6% seldom/never, and without significant gender differences. To summarize, while 70% participate frequently or most of the time, three out of ten youth responded that they participate in key discussions seldom or occasionally.

Youth were also asked how frequently they have the final say in key decisions affecting their lives. They responded as follows: 50% most of the time; 24% frequently; 22% occasionally; and 5% seldom/never. While nearly 75% have the final say frequently or most of the time, just over a quarter of youth seldom or occasionally have the final say in decisions affecting their lives.

In some of the survey's semi-open-ended questions, youth responded that parental and familial interference in their affairs and decisions created problems for them. Youth were also asked during the survey whether they had experienced any pressure against participating in extra-curricular activities. 28% indicated that they had experienced some form of pressure against participating, while 72% said they had not. Note that in Barkawi's 2009 study which had a rather small sample size (n=150), 56% of men students and 55% of women students were prevented by their parents from participating in 'voluntary work' (Barkawi, 2009, 20).

Clearly, there are a significant number of youth whose families are communicating and engaging them on a frequent basis in important deliberations and decision-making processes regarding major life decisions. However, the above figures also suggest that about a quarter of youth are not regularly engaged in deliberations and decision-making about their own lives – depriving them of opportunities to learn and practice decision-making. University youth had also experienced pressure against participating in extra-curricular activities[22].

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[22] Note: the point here is not to judge whether the pressure was justified or not, nor whether it was in the best interests of the youth or not but merely to acknowledge the exertion of social pressure.

Social Trust amongst Youth

When asked during the survey which social groups they trust most, youth responded as follows: 41% did not trust any group; 24% trusted religious clergy; 12% trusted school teachers; 8% trusted university teachers; 5% trusted medical doctors; 3% trusted engineers; 3% trusted the military; 2% trusted politicians; 1% trusted lawyers; and 1% trusted the police. Note, however, the gender breakdown for the 41% of respondents who did not trust any group: of them 47% of women did not trust any social group, compared with 36% of men.

How might such relatively-low levels of social trust be understood? Amaney Jamal posits that the low levels of social trust in the Arab World correspond to attitudes about general untrustworthiness and states that 62% of Jordanians and 71% of Moroccans, for instance, felt that most people would try to take advantage of others (Jamal, 2007, 1335). The 41% of Syrian university who 'did not trust any group' are considerably fewer than Jamal's figures for Jordan and Morocco. While social trust is generally positively associated with youth civic engagement in Western Europe and the United States, the effects of low social trust on Arab youth's civic engagement requires further study.

Social trust is also understood as playing a key role with respect to youth's sense of 'emotional connection to the community or polity' (Flanagan and Faison, 2001, 3). As indicated above, social trust is rather low and may have a negative effect on youth's sense of connection with the broader community.

Spaces and Practices within the University

There is a positive association in the literature between a civic ethos in the university and youth's sense of a broader commitment to the community. However, in our survey, when youth were asked 'if they could change one thing in the university, what would they change', the top responses were the faculty (15%) and the administration (9%). Many of these respondents called for dismissing some, if not all, faculty. Typical responses included: change the faculty; reduce the power of the professors; respect students more; change professors' mentality and behavior. While support for the polity and its principles can come through proximal authority figures like teachers, school administrators and coaches (Flanagan and Faison, 2001, 5), the low expressions of social trust towards university teachers mentioned above (8%), combined with the dissatisfaction expressed towards faculty and administration in our survey, appear unlikely to be generating much support for, or commitment to, the polity.

Inclusive public spaces are also considered important for facilitating youth civic engagement. However, the youth dissatisfaction expressed, as well as other responses concerning 'favoritism by professors', 'unfair marking schemes' and even 'corruption', are not reflective of inclusive spaces in which civic behavior is modeled and promoted.

Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities

Youth participation in extra-curricular activities whether on campus or through non-formal youth organizations "offers young people opportunities to explore what it means to be a member of 'the public,'and to work out the reciprocity between rights and obligations in the meaning of citizenship" (Flanagan and Faison, 7). The survey queried the frequencies with which youth participated in a wide variety of extra-curricular activities regardless of where these activities were organized (i.e., on campus or off). During the survey, Syrian youth reported the following frequencies of participation in extra-curricular activities:

- 80% reported that they seldom or never participate in extra-curricular activities,
- 8% reported participating about once a year.
- 4% reported participating a few times a year.
- 4% reported once a month, and
- 4% reported weekly participation.

In terms of the 80% overall who reported seldom or never participating, there was a slight gender difference, with 77% of men and 83% of women saying they seldom/never participated.

Clearly, a large proportion of the student body does not engage in any regular form of extra-curricular activities. In terms of some of the literature cited, these low rates of participation may be caused in part due to the low levels of social trust generally and the lack of a conducive environment in the university itself. In some cases, social pressure against participating from a youth's parents or family may also serve as a barrier. However, the use of youth organizations by various states in the region to conduct surveillance of youth cannot be ruled out as a deterrent factor (Singerman, 2007, 39).

Discussion of Findings

So, what can we make of youth's participation at home, in the university and in their extra-curricular activities? To what degree, do these spaces and activities support and encourage youth to become involved? If youth are increasingly expected to be 'active citizens,' to what degree are social institutions actually supporting engagement by youth?

Zani and Cicognani's (2009) research on youth civic engagement in Western Europe found that youth need: to feel competent in performing civic actions - that is, they need to acquire the skills, knowledge and practice of doing so. However, youth also need to trust in people to actively engage in different domains and contexts. Youth need to learn how to become engaged civically, and to do so, they need adults to serve as role models and facilitators in an environment where there is both a degree of social trust and the space to make decisions, as well as learn from one's mistakes.

While social trust in professors and other social groups was quite low by northwestern European standards, the percentage of Syrian university students who did not trust any

social group (41%) were actually fewer than general levels of social 'untrustworthiness' amongst the general population in neighboring Jordan (62%) or Morocco (71%). Amaney Jamal attributes low levels of social trust to a general sense of untrustworthiness amongst people in the region as being at the heart of this issue. However, she also points out that highly-educated youth typically tend to hold lower levels of social trust since such youth have not yet had their emergent expectations met by existing political institutions (Jamal, 2007, 340).

In light of the 80% of youth who seldom, if ever, participate in extra-curricular activities whether on campus or off, it is important to note that youth organizations in the region have had little autonomy from the state, in fact:

> One of the most important priorities of these youth councils is surveillance rather than inclusion, particularly on university campuses where students traditionally have been very politically active. Many young people still fear the security services of Middle Eastern governments and intentionally distance themselves from political activism out of fear. (Singerman, 2007, 39)

Such trends are likely to have a deterring or demobilizing effect on youth. Such surveillance practices and fears may also partly explain some parents' pressure on their children against participating. 28% of our survey respondents admitted to having been pressured against getting involved in extra-curricular activities. Barkawi's figures albeit for a smaller sample (n=1050) were even higher (55% for men and 56% for women).

In terms of the university as a space for youth civic engagement, as already stated, there is considerable dissatisfaction with the university environment and particularly with faculty and the administration. Low levels of social trust (8%) in university teachers, combined with claims of favoritism, lack of respect for students, corruption and unfair marking practices by faculty on the one hand and calls to change some or all faculty on the other, are unlikely to result in the development of support amongst students for the polity stated by Flanagan and Faison, nor are students likely to learn from adult leaders modeling good practice.

As the university and venues for extra-curricular activities fade in terms of their relevance for youth civic engagement, the family or household remains as a place where youth may learn to become more engaged citizens - at least for those who have parents who engage them in deliberations and decision-making. However, for the quarter of youth who are not regularly engaged by their families and parents –these youth may be losing out on opportunities to develop their own deliberation, negotiation and decision-making skills in the household. For the remaining 70-73% of youth who are engaged to some degree in deliberations and decision-making, it should not, however, be assumed that all are learning the required skills in problem-solving, assessment of options, negotiation and consultation – further empirical study into household and family practices is required.

Conclusions

Neo-liberalism's 'active citizenship' strategy is affecting the ways in which the 'ideal youth' of Syria are being constructed. While detailed analysis of this discursive production is required, this brief report has endeavored to examine and understand the degree to which Syrian youth are actually encouraged, supported and empowered to engage in their communities, at the university or at home. While the neo-liberal-influenced discursive construction posits an 'active' and 'engaged' youth as its 'ideal', this analysis suggests that in fact, neither the university faculty, nor the environment of the university or surrounding community in particular are actually very supportive of Syrian youth being more engaged or learning to become more engaged. One quarter of parents and families have exerted pressure on their children at least once to dissuade them from such participation. While in their homes and with their parents over 70% of youth participate in key deliberations and decisions about their own lives, some 25% of Syrian youth do not often or regularly participate in these processes.

The survey found that the overwhelming majority (80%) of Syrian university youth seldom, if ever, participate in extra-curricular activities on campus or off. Youth organizations have been extremely close to the state in many parts of the Arab World including having reported on individual youth who have been politically active. If we turn to youth's experiences in university classrooms and on campus, students frequently complained about the need to change some or even all faculty, but also about insufficient respect from professors to students, favoritism and unfair grading. In an educational setting characterized by unfair practices whether in teaching or in grading, youth are unlikely to be interested in becoming more engaged, much less trust those around them. While eight percent of the youth surveyed trusted university professors, and just over 40% admitted that they didn't trust any social group (be they doctors, lawyers, teacher, the police, and so on). According to Flanagan and Faison (2001), lack of trust in the people around them (whether at school, university or in the broader community) has a considerable dampening effect on youth's engagement and commitment to their surroundings.

While there has been a decline in civic participation rates in many parts of northwestern Europe and the United States over past two decades, "youth engagement in voluntary work has been promoted as an antidote to the decline in public interest goals reported in Western societies over the past two decades." (Flanagan, Bowes et al., 461). More research is needed to understand the Government of Syria's interests in promoting 'social responsibility' amongst citizens' and how youth and youth citizenship figure into such programs. In Neyzi's work on Turkish youth, she points out that youth are not inspired to the same extent by the 'big national project' of the future (i.e., the building of a utopian society), they're more interested in the here and now: "Turkish youth are torn between the hopes of constructing a more participatory public sphere and disillusionment with the nation-state as the embodiment of modernity" (Neyzi, 2005, 112). In light of the marginalization of Arab youth and the paucity of organized youth voice, informed empirical research on Syrian youth which can contribute to more youth-oriented social policy is arguably more urgent now than ever.

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Youth engagement in Syria

Based on a sample survey of 1050 Syrian university youth, this paper examines youth participation at home, in the university and in their surrounding communities. We find that at home, over 70% of youth participate frequently or most of the time in deliberations and decision-making processes about their own lives; however, one quarter of youth participate only occasionally or seldom in these processes. In stark contrast, 80% of Syrian youth seldom, if ever, participate in extra-curricular activities. Low social trust amongst youth, combined with the closeness of youth organizations to the state and the lack of a civic ethos or environment in the university, were stated as key deterring factors.