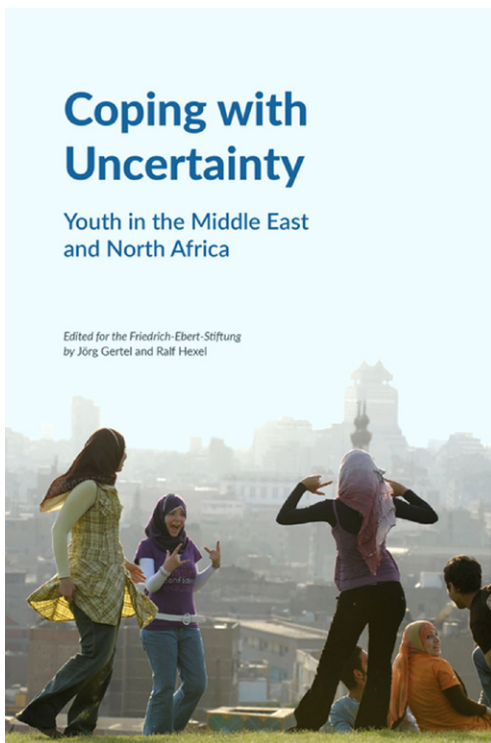




Coping with Uncertainty:

Youth in the Middle East and North Africa

Edited by Jörg Gertel and Ralf Hexel

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The youth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are an important subject of concern, most often discussed among policy-makers and research circles in relation to the youth bulge, youth (un)employment, the gender gap, political activism and radicalisation. Despite growing interest in youth-related questions, academic literature and comparative research on the topic is not well-developed. *Coping with Uncertainty: Youth in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Jörg Gertel and Ralf Hexel, is a valuable contribution to filling this gap in academic literature. The book discusses the youth in the MENA region in a comparative manner, based on a survey of 9000 young people aged 16-30 in 2016, in eight countries: Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, Yemen, and including young Syrian refugees living in Lebanon. A key strength of the book is its lucid explication of the study's methodology in the introduction, and in greater depth in the Appendices (composed of three parts: methodology, questionnaire and strata index). In that sense, it reflects the keen interest and emphasis on methodology characteristic of German scholarship. The study is a project of the German Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, in partnership with the University of Leipzig, Kantar Public, TNS Morocco, and research centres and polling institutes in the respective countries of the MENA.

The book starts with an introduction discussing the literature review, methodology, the findings, and later deliberates on the key concept of the book, "uncertainty". The book maintains that "insecurity" is linked with living conditions and unavailability of resources whereas uncertainty is related with how the youth deal with the future, regarding their hopes and dreams. After this introduction, the findings of the study are discussed in three well-organized parts. The first part dedicated to "Habits and Values" discusses the cultural characteristics of the youth in the region in terms of values, religion, gender and family. The second part, "Economy", discusses the economic aspects related with the youth and focuses on

economy and employment, the middle class, hunger and violence, and finally on mobility, migration and flight. The third part is dedicated to "Politics and Society" and focuses on communication, politics, mobilisation and civic engagement. Following this robust discussion, a (less detailed) fourth part, "Comparing Youth" juxtaposes these findings with the findings of the well-established German Shell Youth Study and enables us to read these findings in comparison/contrast to the youth in Germany.

Young people living in societies under scrutiny (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen) are far from composing a homogeneous group as there are important economic, cultural and political differences between the youth in these respective societies. The research is quite rich in demonstrating this diversity between the societies and thus within the youth of the region, in the domains of culture, economy and politics. The study of three areas (culture, economy and politics) is indeed fundamental for thinking about young people as they are both constructed by and constructors of - or made and broken by - these domains. Furthermore, they are strongly interrelated. One cannot understand the societies in which young people live or the experiences of young people without cross-examining the culture, economy or politics. The findings of the study demonstrate certain commonalities between young people: "many of them are primarily concerned about security, achieving or re-establishing law and order; obtaining an adequate standard of living; and having a trustworthy relationship and family life" (p. 68). Belief in God, often seen by young people as a personal matter, helps to cope not only with misery and stress, but also provides the hope that the future will be better. While most of them are not willing to engage in politics (p. 74) and do not trust anyone (p.78), the family is by far the institution that young people in the region "feel the strongest attachment to when compared to their national, religious, and tribal communities and the 'Arab nation'" (p. 120). The comparison of the findings of the study in the MENA region with those of young people in Germany also offers opportunities to understand

¹ I make reference here to the discussions in the edited book, *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, edited by Alcinda Honwana and Filip de Boeck, Oxford: James Currey, 2005.

the global characteristics as well as local specificities of the region. The final point of the study is that although these young people are the most educated generation as they stayed in the education system the longest, structural changes mean that insecurity and uncertainty awaits them. This is not just a characteristic of the MENA youth, but of young people living in global neoliberal times.

In conclusion, the book is a highly important source for those interested in an empirical study and a detailed description of the youth in the MENA region. However, as in the case of other quantitative surveys, this work needs to be supported by qualitative in-depth research. The interviews referred to for supporting the survey well demonstrate the thickness and depth that qualitative research can provide on the topic. Since there are also recent European projects like the Sahwa Project (2014-2017, www.sahwa.eu) and Power2Youth (2015-2017, <http://power2youth.iai.it>) it would also be very useful to read the findings of this study in relation to the findings of these projects as well. Furthermore, as this study is the first of its kind on the MENA region, it is also very important to continue the study for providing a longitudinal perspective.