

Policy Paper

GETTING THE JOB DONE IN THE ARAB MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES

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Executive summary

Tackling unemployment worldwide, in particular youth unemployment, represents one of the biggest challenges of our time. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and in particular the Arab Mediterranean countries (AMCs), has the world's youngest demographic, but also its highest youth unemployment rates. Millions of young people find themselves out of a job, with youth unemployment rates more than double the global average. This significantly hampers economic growth, stability and development. While there are several factors behind such high levels of youth unemployment, including demographic, urbanisation, political, economic and social trends, one that stands out is the fact that education in these countries does not lead to employment. In fact, unemployment is often higher among the more educated. The demand for modern skills is increasing, but the region's educational systems have still not evolved fast enough to prepare students to join an increasingly competitive market. This skills mismatch is aggravated by social and gender divides, with youths from marginalised socioeconomic backgrounds, especially women, being particularly affected.

Addressing the problem of youth unemployment in the AMCs requires a concerted effort by all stakeholders. Matching the job needs will require a combination of permanently high economic growth and political, economic, social and educational reforms, but also more investments in programmes aimed at dovetailing job seekers' qualifications with the needs of businesses, so as to place unemployed youth in available jobs. Public, private and civil society cooperation is fundamental.

With changes afoot in the region, there is an opportunity to establish the foundations for sustainable economic growth and development. This Policy Paper offers recommendations for EU policymakers, governments in the region, businesses and NGOs that can be translated into measures geared towards harnessing all of the region's potential to "get the job done" in the Arab Mediterranean countries and provide the youth with the necessary opportunities to succeed.

Introduction

Unemployment, in particular youth unemployment, has become a matter of major concern worldwide. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), especially the Arab Mediterranean countries (AMCs) – Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia – is the world’s most youthful region, but also the one with the highest youth unemployment. Millions of young men and women in these countries are either unemployed or underemployed, with youth unemployment rates more than double the global average. Plus, a growing percentage of young people are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), which hinders economic growth, development and stability.

Regions with large youth populations, such as the Arab Mediterranean, should be well placed to become highly technologically advanced and economically stable areas. But to reap the benefits of such an enormous human resource, young people must be well educated and prepared to compete in the global job market. In the AMCs, while there are several factors contributing to youth unemployment, including growing demographics, fast urbanisation, and political, economic and social issues, one that stands out is the fact that education does not lead to employment, but quite the contrary.

As the AMCs become more involved in the global economy, the region’s educational systems are not managing to provide the young with the necessary skills demanded by businesses, resulting in a serious skills mismatch between what employers want and what jobseekers can offer. The situation is particularly acute among young people from marginalised socioeconomic backgrounds, and among women.

All this has generated a severe youth unemployment crisis with which the region’s economies are struggling to cope. While several measures at national and international level are underway to try to address the problem, they are not having the necessary impact, whether because they are not sufficiently adequate or because they are not sufficiently far-reaching. Beyond economic, political and social reforms, deep changes and serious investment in a more tailored education system are needed to match the AMCs’ youth labour supply with the demand from companies for qualified candidates. This can only be achieved through enhanced, sustained coordination and cooperation among all stakeholders.

A young, well-prepared population has the potential to spur sustainable growth and development. Drawing on the extensive research conducted by the SAHWA Project and additional research made by the author, this Policy Paper examines the youth unemployment crisis in five AMCs – Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. While each country has its own intricacies, the analysis focuses mainly on those characteristics that are common to all of them, and offers practical region-wide policy recommendations for EU policymakers, governments in the region, businesses and NGOs that can be translated into measures geared towards harnessing all of the region’s potential to “get the job done” in the Arab Mediterranean countries.

Pain but no gain: Between no jobs and bad jobs

With a global population projected to reach 8.5 billion by 2030 (United Nations, 2015), it is estimated that over 600 million new jobs need to be created, the equivalent of 40 million per year, in order to keep pace with the growth of the working-age population. It is also necessary to improve conditions for about 780 million men and women who are working but not earning enough to lift themselves and their families out of poverty (ILO, 2015a).

The youth are particularly vulnerable. Globally, two out of five young people are either unemployed or underemployed. Of the approximately 200 million unemployed in 2014, 73 million were between 15 and 24 years old – the age group defined as “youth” by the United Nations (UN) (FAO, 2016). Around 169 million young workers live in poverty (less than US\$2 a day) and 286 million are considered to be “near poor” (less than US\$4 a day) (ILO, 2015a).

The population of the AMCs is one of the youngest in the world. Nearly one in five people is between 15 and 24 years old (compared with one in eight in the European Union – EU) and about 50% of the population, or 105 million, is under 25 (compared to 27.8% in the EU) (Eurostat, 2014; Eurostat, 2015; CIA World Factbook).

While such a “youth bulge” should give a competitive edge to the area, millions of young people find themselves out of a job, and the issue has become a major problem nationally and internationally. At 32% in 2014, AMCs’ youth unemployment rate is more than double the global average of 14%. Plus, at country level, the youth unemployment rate has often been double that of total unemployment. In some countries, such as Lebanon and Egypt, the youth unemployment rate is more than three times that of total unemployment (World Bank World Development Indicators).

Informal or low-quality jobs are also a common feature in the AMCs. In Algeria, informality (defined by the absence of social protection in non-agricultural employment) accounts for 34.8% of GDP, while in Tunisia it is 39.2%. Similarly, many young Egyptians are in precarious employment, with 91% being informally employed (Musette, 2014; Zouari, 2014; Said, 2015).

Inactivity during youth has a negative impact on employability, future earnings, and access to quality jobs. After years of searching for employment with no success, many young people may become discouraged and decide to leave the labour force – in the AMCs two out of three working-age youths do not participate in the labour market and, in some places, one in four youths are NEETs (World Bank, World Development Indicators). This represents a huge loss of productive capacity, as it increases the dependency on older generations, with subsequent costs for the economy and society as a whole.

It also becomes a potential source of social unrest. Since the beginning of the financial crisis, social unrest (calculated here as the number of protests as a percentage of the total number of events) has shot up by almost 10%, demonstrating that social unrest tends to increase as joblessness persists and the risk is more acute in places where youth unemployment is high or rising rapidly (ILO, 2015b). Young people’s frustration with unemployment and the lack of opportunities was among the main factors that triggered the 2011 Arab revolutions, which started in Tunisia with the slogan “Employment, Liberty, Dignity”. Five years on, the prospects do not look any more promising and the risk of ongoing social turmoil remains high in many AMCs.

There are several factors compounding this youth unemployment crisis. First, demographic pressure is having a huge impact on the labour market. Despite experiencing a slowdown over the past years, population growth in all AMCs has been positive (except for Libya, which registered -0.1% in 2014), with a regional average of 1.5% in 2014. This means that the labour force in the AMCs has grown 10% in the past five years, among the fastest worldwide. With over 78 million people eligible for work, AMCs’ markets struggle to integrate the younger generations, making it harder to improve GDP per capita or youth employment prospects, in spite of positive economic growth throughout the region. In the

past five years, AMCs have experienced average GDP growth of 3% (this excludes Syria, as there was no data available for the period) (World Bank, World Development Indicators). However, this has not translated into more jobs and there are huge disparities among and within countries.

Second, the AMCs have some of the world's most rapidly expanding urban populations, at an average annual rate of 2%, compared to 0.3% in the EU (World Bank, World Development Indicators). In ten years, 65.4% of the MENA region's total population (currently at 417.5 million) will be living in urban centres, with countries such as Lebanon registering an urban population of over 90%, according to Frost & Sullivan (Gulf Business, 2013). If harnessed correctly, urbanisation growth could turn cities in the region into key economic powerhouses of the future. However, at the moment, it is resulting in overburdened administrations, with negative impacts on services provision, living standards, job opportunities and education.

Third, across the AMCs several risks that are affecting economic growth and thus opportunities for job creation persist. Growth has been decelerating throughout the region, particularly in Tunisia and Lebanon. In Tunisia, tourism (and thus the tourism revenues that are essential to economic survival) has declined due to security fears, especially in light of the three terrorist attacks in 2015 – on the National Bardo Museum in Tunis in March, at a beach resort near Sousse in July, and a bombing on a bus in Tunis in November – and GDP growth is expected to have been a mere 1% in 2015, down from 3.5% in 2010. In Lebanon, the drop has been much more dramatic, from 8% GDP growth in 2010 to 2.9% in 2015, due to political uncertainty and insecurity, which has been aggravated by the Syrian crisis and the massive influx of refugees (ILO, 2016; and World Bank, World Development Indicators).

The intensification of several conflicts in the MENA region, but also in neighbouring areas such as Afghanistan, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and northern Nigeria, has resulted in a sudden increase of refugees settling in many AMCs or using them as platforms to pursue their journey towards Europe. Lebanon, in particular, has received over one million refugees, equivalent to one-quarter of the country's population – the largest level among neighbouring countries. This is expected to increase the Lebanese workforce – already at 1.7 million (excluding as many as 1 million foreign workers or refugees) – by between 30% and 50% (Jaoude, 2015; World Bank, World Development Indicators). Refugees are competing with Lebanese citizens for jobs, access to public services and infrastructure, as well as scarce natural resources.

Fourth, and perhaps most striking, is the fact that, despite important progress, education in the AMCs not only does not guarantee employment, but, paradoxically, increases the chances of being unemployed. Over the last decades, school enrolments have risen markedly throughout the AMCs. Primary education is nearly universal, and the gap between boys and girls in secondary school has practically disappeared. Higher education has grown as well, and most countries (except Morocco) have an educated labour force. Government spending on education as a percentage of GDP has also increased, reaching levels close to, or in some cases even higher, than the European Union. In 2014, general government expenditure on education in the EU-28 amounted to 4.9% of GDP (Eurostat, 2016). In Morocco, in 2013 the government dedicated 6.6% of GDP to education, while in 2012 Tunisia spent 6.2% (CIA World Factbook).

However, inefficiency and poor quality remain commonplace. In Egypt, unemployment among diploma-holders (understood here as those with post-secondary education) is eight times higher than among those with a primary education. Particularly worrisome is the increasing number of university graduates, especially young women, whose specialisations do not match labour market needs, resulting in 40.1% of Egyptian female diploma-holders being out of a job compared to 24.4% of males in 2013. In Lebanon, 45.7% of female diploma-holders are unemployed, while in Algeria unemployment for women with higher education increased over 25% between 2001 and 2011. In some places, unemployment among female diploma-holders surpasses 90% (Jaoude, 2015; World Bank, World Development Indicators). Education in the AMCs has become part of the problem instead of being part of the solution.

As the AMCs become more involved in the global economy, new skills are demanded, but regional educational systems are failing to prepare students to successfully find and maintain a decent job. Employability remains a challenge. Companies are reportedly struggling to find skilled workers to fill vacancies. A report by the employment-services firm Manpower indicates that over one third of employers worldwide has trouble filling positions (*The Economist*, 2012). A 2013 study by McKinsey & Company found that less than 50% of employers consider graduates adequately prepared (Mourshed, 2013). Along the same lines, a 2010 PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) survey reveals that 87% of Arab CEOs believe that the limited supply of candidates with the right skills is one of the biggest challenges for businesses in the AMCs today (PwC, 2010).

Entrepreneurs regularly speak of a lack of both general job readiness and specific skills as constraints to hiring. Soft skills like communication, teamwork, analytical and innovative thinking are among the most demanded, but the spectrum is very broad, including also language, leadership, and critical skills, CV presentation and interview techniques, and general workplace behaviour like punctuality, flexibility and adequate work attire (Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation and PwC, 2008).

Students themselves also find that their education is not in line with market needs. For many youths in Arab Mediterranean countries, their education is too theoretical and not necessarily linked to the realities of the job market. Interviews in Morocco as part of the SAHWA Project revealed that university curricula are mainly theoretical, with no practical applications or tests, and are void of soft skills or personal development, areas that are highly valued in today's business environment. Demotivation often occurs, not only in terms of looking for employment, but also in terms of wanting to get an education. In Egypt, many young people end up wishing they had never spent their money on an education that yields no employment, and would rather have saved it to cover the needs of their families. In Tunisia, most of those fortunate enough to get a job end up working in areas very much unrelated to their fields of study. In Lebanon, focus groups revealed a lack of access (there are no universities in the villages, only in the cities), inadequate materials (books are out of date), unprepared lecturers, and a large degree of discrimination based on political affiliation, and socioeconomic or religious backgrounds. Similarly, interviews in Algeria showed that those that do find a job are often faced with below-the-market conditions. This is especially the case for young women, as a result of which many prefer to not participate in the labour market (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d; 2015e).

Women's low participation in economic and political life is another factor that affects social progress and thus employment rates in the AMCs. In the World Economic Forum's 2015

Global Gender Gap – which ranks 145 economies according to how well they leverage their female talent pool – AMCs were all at the bottom of the list: Tunisia (127th), Algeria (128th), Egypt (136th), Lebanon (138th), and Morocco (139th) (WEF, 2015).

Despite being increasingly more educated than their male counterparts, female youth unemployment in the AMCs is almost double that of young males: 46% and 28%, respectively. Moreover, except for Morocco and Tunisia, the unemployment gender gap has been widening. In Algeria, for example, it grew from 3.3 percentage points in 2004 to 14.4 in 2014 (World Bank, World Development Indicators).

In the next decades, it is estimated that 50 million women will come of working age in the region. Yet, four out of five working-age women do not participate in the labour force, constituting 80% of the AMCs' inactive population (World Bank, World Development Indicators).

A 2015 survey by Education For Employment (EFE), YouGov, and Bayt.com revealed that employer expectations that women will stop working when they start a family, the need for flexible working hours, transportation and commuting difficulties, and inadequate salaries are among the top challenges in terms of female labour force participation (FLFP) (Barry, 2015). Some employers point to logistical constraints, such as special entrances, seating arrangements and separation that make it harder to hire women in many AMCs (Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation and PwC, 2008).

Another restricting factor is the nature of many Arab economies, which are largely dependent on oil, such as Algeria. The oil industry tends to be dominated by men, reinforcing gender segregation and limiting young women's ability to enter the labour force and compete on similar grounds as men. In Algeria, 84.6% of working-age women are inactive (15.4% FLFP). FLFP is slightly higher in countries that are less dependent on oil revenues like Morocco (26.7%), Tunisia (25.2%), Egypt (23.8%), and Lebanon (23.7%) (World Bank, World Development Indicators). In addition to fostering dignity and financial independence, matching the FLFP rate to that of males could boost regional GDP by 47% (Barry, 2015). On the other hand, failure to improve FLFP is already resulting in elevated social and economic costs.

All this has given rise to a spiralling youth unemployment crisis that will affect many generations to come and which the region's economies are increasingly struggling to address. Considerable resources have been invested at national and international level, but given the nature and magnitude of the problem, current initiatives are not producing the necessary results to make a significant impact.

National and international initiatives

At global level, the United Nations' new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, approved in 2015, has embraced the need to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. The ILO's 2016 Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth will “assist young people in developing the skills needed to compete in today's job market”. The World Bank lists over 5,000 employment initiatives worldwide, approximately 10% in the MENA region (World Bank, Projects and Operations).

Similarly, the Europe 2020 growth strategy has three flagship initiatives under the areas of employment, social affairs and inclusion: Youth on the Move; An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs; and the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion. Also, the European Commission's 2013 Youth Employment Initiative and the Youth Guarantee Recommendation aim to support young people "who are not in education, employment or training" and "ensure [their] successful transition into work".

The EU also works in many AMCs with local partners from the public, private and NGO sectors. Some initiatives worth mentioning include the Euromed Youth Programme (since 1999), with hundreds of projects in the region, including in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia; and Erasmus+, which in 2014 awarded 65 scholarships to AMC master's students and 11 fellowships (European Commission, 2014).

The Youth Employment Inventory (YEI) lists 328 programmes devoted to advancing young people's labour opportunities in the region as a whole. Of these, 291 are in the five AMCs under study, mostly in Egypt (184) and Tunisia (83), followed by Morocco (12), Lebanon (11) and, lastly, Algeria (1). However, critics say that most programmes tend to reach only a relatively small proportion of the youth population, very few are women-specific, and many suffer from a lack of monitoring, evaluation and mainstreaming in the system (Said, 2015).

At national level, all five AMCs have invested considerable resources in combatting unemployment and youth unemployment. Most measures have focused on Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs), designed to help match labour supply and demand and to improve employability, job placement, and self-employment. However, in most cases government agencies lack the necessary capacity to provide the desired services, and resources are often poorly allocated. Critics argue that in these countries ALMPs have little positive impact, producing only modest or no return in terms of employability and earnings.

"A solid and good-quality early education probably represents a cheaper, more cost-effective preventative measure than later remediation through ALMPs" (Bardak, 2013). In places with such large "youth bulges" as the AMCs, experts argue that when the age-dependency ratio – defined by the World Bank as the ratio of dependents (people younger than 15 or older than 64) to working-age population (those aged 15-64) – shrinks, there appears to be a "demographic window of opportunity" for economic growth, as greater productivity and higher incomes are possible (Assaad & Roudi, 2007). "But the economic benefits are not automatic. It all depends on how well young people are educated and prepared for the global job markets that demand modern skills, and how well governments invest in improving educational systems and creating quality jobs for new entrants" (Roudi 2011).

Conclusions and recommendations: Getting the job done

The AMCs, with the world's youngest population, have huge untapped human resources that, if properly employed, could turn the region into one of the world's largest economic powerhouses. But the extent to which this youth bulge will contribute positively to societal development depends on how well governments are able to meet the current needs of young people.

Failure to attend to these needs is resulting in the marginalisation of a large proportion of society, with the pace of development trailing behind. Instead of being an asset, the AMCs' youth has become a burden. The ILO notes that youth unemployment and underemployment incur costs to the economy and society, as well as individuals and their families, as they end

up using their parents' income: one study of Tunisian youth, for example, found that almost three-fourths of women and more than one-third of men relied on their parents for pocket money (Roudi, 2011).

The challenges facing the AMCs' youth today are not the same as those faced by older generations. Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia are undergoing fast changes that require constant adjustment to new labour market conditions.

In order to create the millions of jobs needed to accommodate the old and new youth labour force, urgent political, economic, social and, above all, educational changes must be effected. In its report "Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract", the World Bank argues for transforming Arab societies and economies by establishing a new social contract whereby markets deliver socially acceptable outcomes, states support the creation of institutions that deliver better governance processes and outcomes, labour regulations guarantee fairness while preserving flexibility and incentives, and educational reform is guided by projected labour market needs, skills acquisition and lifetime learning (World Bank, 2004).

But the AMCs "cannot make the needed leap [...] on their own". As well as more investments and know-how from international institutions such as the EU, there is a need for more systematic coordination of businesses and civil society "to help them develop innovative, collaborative, and scalable solutions" (Jalbout & Farah, 2016) to effect change at various levels:

At the educational level

1. Improve the information base at schools

Change must start early if it is to have a real impact. Like in many EU countries, it is necessary to include career planning and guidance in secondary school curricula. If students begin thinking about their careers early on, they are likely to make better informed decisions when choosing what to study at university or in vocational training.

2. Design better higher education courses

When designing university programmes, current and future market needs must be analysed, with course offerings and curricula adjusted accordingly. It is not so much a question of investing more in education *per se*, but rather of investing more in more efficient, higher quality, demand-driven education. Employers could help by contributing to designing curricula, engaging as lecturers and guest speakers, offering training, internships, apprenticeships, and mentoring as part of university courses, job shadowing, participating in career fairs, and committing to hire students upon graduation, among many other kinds of involvement. Permanent communication between government, educators and business representatives is essential here.

3. Improve vocational education and training

Beyond reforming educational systems in schools and universities, it is also necessary to pay attention to vocational education and training. There is a need to broaden the scope to also include soft skills, as demanded by today's labour market. And as, in many AMCs, vocational training fails to elicit interest among young people, who prefer to go for a more socially respected education such as a university degree, efforts must be devoted to eliminating this stigma and promoting education and training in vocational sectors, which are vital to the economy. Publicising cases of young people who have succeeded in these types of professions, whether by being employed, establishing their own business or offering their expertise to multiple companies as self-employed professionals, could help in this sense.

4. Invest more in education for employment programmes

Significantly higher investment is needed in tailor-made and demand-driven youth education for employment programmes that can equip those that have already graduated with the necessary skills to compete in the job market. There are already several NGOs undertaking programmes in the region, in close cooperation with international and national institutions, as well as the private sector. But more support for such organisations is warranted, both from businesses and institutions like the EU, especially to scale up pilot initiatives that have already proved successful.

5. Bring work to the classroom

Arab employers and jobseekers alike opine that it is necessary to shift from an overly theoretical focus to one centred on developing more practical skills that are applicable in the job market. The challenge is to create and deliver courses and programmes that are valuable to employers, but also that students are able to absorb. Instead of focusing solely on traditional teaching methods such as lectures and book learning, it is important to go further and invest in experiential learning methods, such as role-playing, mock interviews, physical and/or computer company simulations, and “serious games”, among others. “Bring[ing] the workplace to the classroom”, to quote McKinsey (Mourshed, 2013), helps students understand and learn from their mistakes and practice newly acquired skills in real-time settings. The more hands-on experience they acquire, the better prepared they will be.

6. Better train the trainers

Teachers too need better training, better economic compensation and more social respect. Arab CEOs state that improving teacher training is the most important issue to address at both high school and university levels (Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation and PwC, 2008). Investments must be made in the establishment of “dual programmes” for teachers, whereby educators can get real workplace experience. Training the trainers, and measuring their performance, is a crucial step to ensure high quality.

7. Better monitor and evaluate quality

Throughout the process, it is important to carry out a thorough evaluation to learn what works and what does not with a view to continued improvement at every step. One way to

measure quality could be to introduce independent accreditation systems and quality control mechanisms based on international benchmarks and/or establish a university ranking system to encourage positive competition. Governments can help by actively regulating and monitoring the educational system throughout the region, while NGOs also play a crucial oversight role.

At the professional career level

8. Focus more on career development

Career development must not be overlooked. “More than training is required to resolve the youth unemployment crisis in the AMCs. Young people also need to believe that they can add significant value to the companies they work for” (McAuliffe, 2013). Providing young people with career projection opportunities increases not only their chances of success but can also be a helpful tool for companies to retain staff.

This aspect is also important in terms of self-employment professional development. More investments should be made not only to encourage self-employment (in particular in areas such as ICT, where the fast-changing market environment requires rapid skills innovation), but also to build young people’s confidence by showing how they can succeed with good initiatives and ideas without needing large investments or access to capital.

9. Invest more in women-specific initiatives

It is also important to account for gender, not only when shaping programmes but also at employer level. To create more and better pathways to jobs for young women, employers could also consider adopting policies to facilitate conciliation, such as offering nursery/day care facilities and flexible schedules, adjusting compensation packages to incentivise women applicants, and providing transportation solutions that are well-suited to the specific context (Barry, 2015).

At a cross-cutting level

10. Scale up programmes

Applying all this at the scale necessary to impact positively on the region’s youth employment perspectives is a very costly endeavour. To massively scale up these efforts, technology can play a vital role. The rapid development of e-learning and blended learning approaches and platforms, “serious games” and other kinds of simulations can help by offering tailored, practical experience to large numbers at comparatively low costs. Here, the EU could be of tremendous value, providing not only financial support but also the necessary technology, and could leverage the partnerships with large IT companies working in those markets.

Providing young people with the best pathway to transition from school to a decent job calls for investing in effective education for employment programmes that can help address the skills mismatch and meet the needs of young people, of businesses, of countries and of the region, giving them access to social protection and basic services, and ensuring equal opportunities regardless of gender, socioeconomic, religious or political background. It is time to “get the job done” in the Arab Mediterranean countries and provide the youth with the necessary opportunities to succeed.

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Researching
Arab Mediterranean Youth:
Towards a New Social Contract



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