



Youth Participation in Peace Processes in North Africa and the Middle East: From the Amman Declaration to the Pact for the Mediterranean

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Sustainable Cooperation for Peace & Security (SCPS)

SCPS envisions a world in which young people and civil society play a central role in building inclusive, peaceful, and resilient societies, both online and offline to create a world free from violence. The organisation aspires to help nurture communities where conflicts are addressed through dialogue, critical thinking, and cooperation, and where digital spaces are safe, participatory, and respectful. SCPS imagines international and local systems in which youth, women, and marginalised voices meaningfully influence policies related to peace, security, and human rights. By bridging global agendas with local action, SCPS seeks to contribute to a future where peacebuilding is sustainable, participatory, and grounded in social justice.

Focus Countries: Libya, Yemen, Tunisia, MENA region

1. Introduction

Youth participation in peace processes across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has undergone significant transformation over the past decade. This was shaped by demographic pressures, protracted conflict, and evolving international norms. The adoption of the Amman Youth Declaration (2015) and the subsequent endorsement of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda through UN Security Council Resolution 2250 marked a normative shift, recognising young people not as passive victims or security risks, but as essential actors in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery (United Nations, 2023). This recognition was further reinforced through subsequent resolutions and policy frameworks that called for youth inclusion across peace negotiations, reconciliation, and implementation processes (United Nations, 2023).

Despite this normative progress, meaningful youth participation in peace processes across the region remains limited. In countries such as Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia, young people continue to face structural, political, and conflict-related barriers that constrain their access to formal peace negotiations and decision-making arenas (UNDP, 2024). Peace processes remain dominated by political elites, armed actors, and external stakeholders, while youth engagement is frequently confined to consultative, localised, or project-based initiatives with limited influence over outcomes (UNDP, 2024). This gap between international commitments and operational practice has contributed to peace processes that struggle with legitimacy, societal buy-in, and sustainability.

At the same time, youth engagement in the region has not diminished; rather, it has shifted. Research shows that Gen Z and younger cohorts continue to hold strong civic and democratic values, but increasingly pursue participation through alternative pathways, including community-level mediation, informal dialogue initiatives, digital activism, and issue-based advocacy (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024; UN Women, 2025). These practices demonstrate both the capacity and willingness of young people to contribute meaningfully to peace, even when excluded from formal processes.

This focus on the MENA region is significant for the YPS agenda due to the region's combination of protracted conflicts, political transitions, and constrained civic spaces. Which together create both acute barriers and critical opportunities for youth participation. The region provides a salient case for examining the gap between global normative commitments and their implementation in practice. Concurrently, the prominence of youth-led mobilisation since the 2011 uprisings and in subsequent civic movements highlights the political agency of young people in shaping governance and social change. Analysing youth participation in MENA therefore offers broader insights into how the YPS agenda can move from normative recognition to operational impact in complex environments afflicted by conflict, making it a strategically important context for both policy and practice.

This paper examines the evolution of youth participation in peace processes from the Amman Declaration to contemporary regional frameworks, including emerging Euro-Mediterranean cooperation initiatives. It analyses persistent barriers to meaningful youth inclusion, highlights youth-led innovations across Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, and advances policy-relevant recommendations for institutionalising youth participation as a core component of the peace process design. In doing so, the paper argues that youth participation is not a normative add-on but a structural condition for legitimate, inclusive, and durable peace in the MENA region.

2. Global and Regional Trends Shaping Youth Participation in Peace and Security (2015–2025)

Between 2015 and 2025, youth participation in peace and security across the MENA region has been shaped by demographic pressures and protracted conflict amid political fragmentation. The region's demographic structure is characterised by a large youth population, with young people comprising a significant share of society. Yet often facing limited pathways into decision-making due to structural, political, and socioeconomic constraints (OECD, 2022; UNDP, 2024). In parallel, armed conflict and instability in contexts such as Libya and Yemen have remained persistent features of the regional

landscape, constraining governance and widening gaps between state institutions and society (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2024).

Across this period, civic space has also narrowed in many contexts, affecting young activists, CSOs, and community organisers through restrictions on association, repression, and heightened surveillance (OECD, 2022). These pressures intersect with peace process architectures that are frequently elite-driven, privileging political leaders and armed actors while limiting broad societal participation in negotiations and implementation. In practice, this produces a recurring pattern noted in YPS implementation debates: youth are acknowledged as stakeholders but rarely afforded sustained influence over peace process priorities, sequencing, or outcomes (United Nations, 2018b).

In response to exclusion from formal processes, youth engagement has increasingly shifted toward informal, community-based, and digital pathways. Everyday peacebuilding approaches highlight how young people contribute through local mediation, relationship-building, and dialogue in settings where national processes are stalled or inaccessible (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). At the same time, youth civic participation has increasingly leveraged digital mobilisation and issue-based activism as alternative routes to collective action (Giugni & Grasso, 2021; Leclerc et al., 2025; Pickard, 2019). Evidence reviews on youth civic engagement also underline that meaningful youth involvement tends to be stronger when participation is youth-driven and linked to real influence rather than symbolic inclusion (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024; Leclerc, 2025).

These trends reshape what “participation in peace processes” means in practice. A central implication is a growing mismatch between where peace is formally negotiated and where legitimacy is built and maintained: youth engagement is often strongest at local and networked levels, while national-level mediation remains comparatively closed (Ozcelik & Odin Shaw, 2023; United Nations, 2018b; UNDP, 2024). A 2025 thematic review of the Peacebuilding Fund’s YPS efforts similarly stresses the importance of mechanisms that connect youth councils, coalitions, networks, and local initiatives to decision-making structures, so youth participation becomes consequential for peacebuilding design and implementation (Gaston et al., 2025).

3. Evolution and Implementation of the YPS Agenda in MENA Peace Processes (2015–2025)

3.1 From the Amman Declaration to UNSCR 2250 and Beyond

The Amman Youth Declaration (2015) marked a turning point in global youth policy by articulating youth participation as a political right and a peacebuilding imperative. Its principles directly informed the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015), which formally recognised young people as partners in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery. Subsequent resolutions, notably UNSCR 2419 (2018), UNSCR 2535 (2020), and UNSCR 2807 (2025) reinforced this normative framework by calling for youth inclusion across all phases of peace processes, including negotiation, implementation, and reconciliation, and by urging Member States to institutionalise youth participation through policies, financing, and reporting mechanisms (United Nations, 2020).

Within the MENA region, these normative advances resonated strongly with post-2011 political transformations and ongoing conflicts. Youth participation was increasingly referenced in national strategies, UN country frameworks, and donor-supported peacebuilding programmes. UNDP (2024) highlights the integration of the YPS agenda into UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and national policy processes, as well as its expansion across country-level programming. However, the translation of global commitments into operational inclusion within formal peace processes remained uneven. While youth were acknowledged as stakeholders, their roles were often confined to parallel consultations, civil society forums, or project-based engagement rather than direct participation in mediation and decision-making structures (United Nations, 2018b).

3.2 Progress and Persistent Gaps in Implementation

Some progress has been achieved at local and sub-national levels. In Libya, youth have engaged in municipal dialogue processes, local mediation efforts, and community reconciliation initiatives, often supported by UN and civil society programmes (United Nations Support Mission in Libya, 2026). In Tunisia, youth advisory councils and civic platforms have been utilised to influence municipal governance and accountability mechanisms following the 2011 revolution (United Nations Democracy Fund, 2022). In Yemen, youth networks have contributed to community-level ceasefire monitoring and humanitarian coordination in contexts where formal negotiations have stalled (UNDP, 2024).

Taken together, these examples highlight some important dynamics regarding youth participation in peace processes across the region. First, they demonstrate that youth engagement is often most substantive at local and sub-national levels, where proximity to communities enables young people to contribute to mediation, dialogue facilitation, and service coordination (UNDP 2024; United Nations Support Mission in Libya, 2026). Second, they show that youth participation is frequently enabled through hybrid arrangements involving international organisations, civil society, and municipal structures, rather than through formal peace architectures (United Nations Democracy Fund, 2022; UNDP, 2024). Third, these cases illustrate that youth contributions tend to focus on process-oriented functions such as: trust-building, communication, and social cohesion. These examples are fundamental to sustaining peace but remain undervalued in formal negotiations (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). Thereby, showing both the practical relevance and the functional added value of youth participation, even in contexts where their inclusion in national-level decision-making remains limited.

As mentioned above, structural inclusion of youth in formal peace processes remains limited. Youth representation in official delegations, mediation teams, and implementation bodies is rare, and when present, it is frequently symbolic (Paffenholz, 2014). International mediation practices continue to prioritise elite bargains among armed and political actors, reflecting a broader tendency to treat peace negotiations as technical or security-driven exercises rather than inclusive political processes (Nilsson, 2012). Reviews of YPS implementation, including *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* and the *2025 Peacebuilding Fund Thematic Review on Youth, Peace and Security*, confirm that this gap between commitments and practice is one of the agenda's most persistent weaknesses (United Nations, 2018b; Gaston et al., 2025).

3.3 Institutional Frameworks and Lessons Learned

The experiences concerning the YPS implementation in MENA highlight several lessons. First, normative recognition alone is insufficient: without clear institutional mandates, youth participation remains discretionary and vulnerable to political resistance. Second, local-level engagement, while valuable, cannot substitute for inclusion in national and international peace architectures if youth contributions are to influence outcomes. Finally, where youth participation has been sustained and meaningful, it has been supported by formal mechanisms, predictable financing, and links between grassroots initiatives and decision-making processes (UNDP, 2024; Gaston et al., 2025).

Overall, the evolution of the YPS agenda since 2015 demonstrates growing recognition of youth as leading peace actors, but its implementation in MENA formal peace processes continues to lag behind its normative ambition. Bridging this gap requires moving beyond consultative models toward institutionalised youth participation that reshapes how peace processes are designed, negotiated, and implemented.

4. Diagnosis: Barriers to Meaningful Youth Participation in Peace Processes

Despite growing normative recognition under the YPS agenda, meaningful youth participation in peace processes across MENA remains constrained by a combination of structural, social, and conflict-related barriers (United Nations, 2020). These barriers do not operate in isolation; rather, they reinforce one another, systematically limiting youth influence over negotiation agendas, implementation mechanisms, and peace process outcomes (Simpson, 2019).

4.1 Structural and Institutional Barriers

Formal peace processes in the MENA region continue to be dominated by political elites, armed actors, and external mediators, leaving limited institutional space for youth participation (OECD, 2016). Negotiation frameworks often prioritise short-term stability and elite bargaining, treating peace as a technical or security exercise rather than a broadly inclusive political process (Berents, 2025; Nilsson, 2012; Paffenholz, 2014). As a result, youth are rarely included in official delegations, mediation teams, or implementation bodies, even where they represent a significant share of the population affected by conflict (United Nations, 2018b).

Institutional mechanisms for youth engagement, where they exist, are frequently ad hoc or project-based (Langa, 2024). Youth advisory roles are often disconnected from decision-making authority and lack clear mandates to influence negotiation outcomes or implementation priorities (Gaston et al., 2025). Procedural barriers, including restrictive eligibility criteria, high age thresholds, and opaque political party structures, further constrain access to formal peace architectures (UNDP, 2024). These dynamics reinforce a pattern in which youth participation is framed as consultative rather than consequential.

4.2 Social, Cultural, and Intersectional Barriers

Social and cultural norms across the region further limit youth influence in peace processes. Hierarchical age relations, patriarchal governance structures, and intergenerational mistrust often

position youth as inexperienced or politically immature, undermining their legitimacy as peace actors (Pickard, 2019). Tokenistic inclusion, where youth presence serves symbolic purposes without real power, remains widespread and contributes to disengagement and frustration (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

These barriers are compounded for young women, displaced youth, and members of marginalised communities, who face intersecting forms of exclusion (Kern, 2025; Leclerc et al., 2023). Gender norms and security risks frequently restrict young women's participation in both formal and informal peace initiatives, despite evidence that inclusive processes contribute to more durable peace outcomes (UN Women, 2025). Without intersectional approaches, youth participation risks reproducing existing inequalities rather than transforming peace processes (Kern, 2025; Leclerc, 2025).

4.3 Contextual and Conflict-Driven Barriers

Ongoing conflict, political instability, and securitised environments create additional obstacles to youth participation. In Libya and Yemen, fragmented authority, militia presence, and weak rule of law expose young peacebuilders to risks of harassment, intimidation, or violence, discouraging engagement in visible political processes (Skouri, 2025; UNDP, 2024). In such contexts, participation is not only a political challenge but also a security concern.

Even in comparatively stable settings such as Tunisia, expanded civic space has not consistently translated into sustained youth influence over national decision-making (World Bank, 2014). While youth activism has been visible, pathways from mobilisation to policy impact remain limited, reinforcing perceptions that participation does not lead to tangible change (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024).

Taken together, these structural, social, and contextual barriers explain why youth participation in peace processes across MENA remains fragmented and uneven (Kern, 2025, Simpson, 2019). Addressing them requires systemic reforms that move beyond inclusion as a principle toward participation as a practice embedded in peace process design, implementation, and accountability (Gaston et al., 2025).

5. Emerging Practice and Youth-Led Innovations

Despite persistent exclusion from formal peace negotiations, youth across MENA have developed innovative forms of engagement that contribute to peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and social cohesion (Natil, 2021). These practices often emerge in response to institutional gaps and reflect adaptive strategies that enable youth to exert influence where formal access is limited (Gaston et al., 2025).

5.1 Community-Led Mediation and Local Peacebuilding

At the community level, youth have played a central role in mediation, dialogue facilitation, and conflict de-escalation, particularly in contexts marked by fragmented governance. In Libya, youth committees in urban centres and southern regions have mediated local disputes, supported municipal authorities, and facilitated communication between divided communities in the absence of effective

national institutions (Skouri, 2025). Similarly, in Yemen, youth networks have contributed to community-based ceasefire monitoring and humanitarian coordination, helping to stabilise local environments amid stalled national negotiations (UNDP, 2024). These forms of “everyday peacebuilding” demonstrate how youth participation can sustain social cohesion and reduce violence even when excluded from formal peace processes (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

Building on these dynamics, several concrete youth-led initiatives illustrate how such community-level mediation and peacebuilding operates in practice. In Libya, the YouEngage initiative, established by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) (2026), has supported youth-led dialogue forums and local mediation efforts by connecting young peacebuilders with municipal authorities and national stakeholders. According to UNSMIL (2026), YouEngage facilitates “structured dialogue between youth and decision-makers” and supports youth participation in “local peace initiatives and reconciliation processes.” Furthermore, broader research on Libyan civil society highlights the role of civil society actors in facilitating dialogue, mediation, and reconciliation between divided communities, such as the Fezzan Libya Organization based in Sebha (Zeraouia, 2025)

Moreover, in Yemen youth-led networks supported under UNDP programming, particularly through the Youth Leadership Development Foundation and similar organisations, have played a role in community-level ceasefire monitoring and humanitarian coordination (UNDP, 2024). Youth actors contribute to “local mediation, social cohesion initiatives, and coordination of humanitarian responses in conflict-affected communities” (UNDP, 2024). These examples demonstrate that youth participation is not merely abstract but institutionalised through identifiable platforms and organisations that operate at the intersection of civil society, local governance, and international support frameworks. As such, they reinforce the argument that meaningful youth engagement in peacebuilding is already occurring in practice, albeit primarily outside formal negotiation structures, thereby underscoring the need to better connect these initiatives to higher-level peace processes.

5.2 Digital and Informal Civic Engagement

Digital platforms have further expanded the scope of youth-led peace engagement. Youth activists increasingly use online spaces to document violations, advocate for inclusion, mobilise communities, and maintain cross-regional networks, particularly where physical civic space is constrained (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024). While digital engagement introduces risks related to surveillance and repression, it has lowered barriers to participation and enabled young people, including young women and marginalised groups, to contribute to peace-related discourse and accountability efforts beyond local boundaries (Giugni & Grasso, 2021).

However, the potential of digital civic engagement is contingent on reliable access to internet infrastructure, which is increasingly subject to state control in conflict-affected and authoritarian contexts. Governments have demonstrated the capacity to deliberately restrict or shut down connectivity during periods of unrest, thereby directly constraining youth-led mobilisation and peace engagement (Access Now, 2023b). A prominent example is Iran, where authorities imposed widespread internet blackouts during the 2022 protests following the death of Masha Amini (Access Now, 2023a). These blackouts meant that the ability of citizens to communicate, organise, and document events was severely limited (Access Now, 2023b).

Similarly, Freedom House (2023) reports that the Iranian government ensured that access to the internet was restricted to be able to control information flows and meddle with protest coordination. These disruptions illustrate how digital participation remains structurally fragile: while online spaces can expand youth agency, they can also be rapidly curtailed, reinforcing existing power asymmetries and limiting the sustainability of digital peace engagement in highly securitised environments.

5.3 Structured Youth Platforms and Regional Networks

Where formalised youth councils and advisory platforms exist, they have provided more sustained opportunities for engagement. In Tunisia, youth advisory mechanisms linked to municipal governance have enabled young people to influence local decision-making and accountability initiatives (United Nations Democracy Fund, 2022). Regional and transnational youth networks have also facilitated knowledge exchange, capacity building, and advocacy, strengthening youth agency across borders (Orsini et al., 2025).

5.4 The Pact for the Mediterranean as an Opportunity Structure

Recent regional policy developments provide an opportunity to address persistent gaps in youth participation in peace processes, particularly through the Pact for the Mediterranean (European Commission, 2025). As a renewed framework for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, the Pact emphasises stability, inclusive governance, youth employment, and social cohesion across Mediterranean countries and possibly also partners from the Middle East (European Commission, 2025). However, youth participation within this framework is still largely framed through socioeconomic and employability lenses, rather than as a core component of peacebuilding and conflict prevention (European Economic and Social Committee, 2025).

Integrating the commitments made through the YPS resolutions into the Pact's implementation would enable a shift from viewing youth as beneficiaries of stability to recognising them as contributors to peace process design, dialogue facilitation, and post-conflict governance. By aligning the Pact's political and financial instruments with YPS principles, including meaningful participation, protection, and partnership, regional actors could support youth inclusion not only in development programming but also in mediation efforts, reconciliation processes, and institutional reform initiatives. Such alignment would strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of peace efforts in the Mediterranean region and ensure that regional cooperation frameworks respond to the political agency and lived realities of young people in conflict-affected contexts.

6. Transformation: Rethinking Youth Participation and Policy Recommendations

Advancing meaningful youth participation in peace processes across MENA requires a shift from ad hoc inclusion toward structural transformation in how peace processes are designed, resourced, and governed (United Nations Peacemaker, n.d.; Gaston et al., 2025). The analysis above demonstrates that youth engagement is most effective when participation is embedded across peace process cycles rather than confined to parallel or consultative mechanisms.

First, peace processes should move from consultation to shared agency. Youth representatives should be integrated into formal negotiation, mediation, and implementation structures with clearly defined

mandates and decision-making authority. Evidence from peace process research shows that inclusive designs enhance legitimacy, societal buy-in, and the durability of agreements (Nilsson, 2012; Paffenholz, 2014). Institutionalising youth roles within mediation architectures would align practice with the commitments articulated in UNSCR 2250, 2419, 2535, and 2807 which call on Member States and relevant actors to ensure meaningful youth participation in peace processes.

Second, multi-level participation frameworks are essential. Youth engagement at community and municipal levels should be systematically linked to national and regional peace processes through formal feedback channels and representation pathways. This would ensure that grassroots insights inform negotiation agendas and implementation priorities, addressing the disconnect between local peacebuilding and elite-driven mediation (UNDP, 2024; Gaston et al., 2025).

Third, financing mechanisms must be reoriented. The mix of short-term, project-based funding limits continuity and influence. Donors should prioritise multi-year, flexible funding windows that support youth-led peace organisations' core capacities, including security, digital infrastructure, and institutional development (UNOY, 2024).

Fourth, accountability and intergenerational partnerships should be strengthened through youth-specific indicators within peace process reporting and co-leadership models that move beyond symbolic participation (Gaston et al., 2025; United Nations Peacemaker, n.d). Finally, regional frameworks such as the Pact for the Mediterranean offer a strategic opportunity to embed YPS principles into Euro-Mediterranean peace and governance cooperation, linking youth participation to mediation, reconciliation, and institutional reform (European Economic and Social Committee, 2025).

7. Closing remarks

Ten years after the Amman Declaration and the adoption of UNSCR 2250, youth participation in peace processes across MENA remains characterised by a persistent gap between normative recognition and practical influence. While young people continue to contribute to peace through community mediation, digital activism, and informal dialogue, their exclusion from formal peace architectures undermines the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and sustainability of peace efforts (United Nations, 2018b).

This paper has shown that youth participation is not a peripheral or symbolic concern but a structural condition for effective peacebuilding. Addressing demographic pressures, shrinking civic space, and elite-driven mediation requires rethinking peace process designs to centre youth agency across local, national, and regional levels. Integrating commitments to YPS principles into emerging regional frameworks, including the Pact for the Mediterranean, provides a concrete pathway to move from participation as an aspiration to participation as a practice.

For the next decade of the YPS agenda, the challenge is no longer whether youth should be included, but how peace processes can be transformed to ensure that young people shape decisions that affect their futures. Institutionalising meaningful youth participation is essential to building legitimate, inclusive, and durable peace across the MENA region.

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