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# SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR YOUTH-LED CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

**Abdullatif Sleibi**

Senior Project Officer/Data Analyst, PAX for Peace (PAX)

## Introduction

Social media, as a broad conflagration of interactive websites and applications oriented around sharing content in an online community, is reshaping how, when and whether conflicts will manifest or end in the physical world (Proctor, 2021; Brown & Livingston, 2019). This is exemplified by cases such as the violence in Syria that resulted from the false online portrayal of White Helmets as a terrorist rather than humanitarian group (Mercy Corps, 2019), or the role played by social media in the coordination and mobilisation of activists during the Arab uprisings (Brown, Guskin, & Mitchell, 2012). Looking towards the digital ecosystem of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and specifically the Southern Neighbourhood (SN) of the European Union (EU), online users between the ages of 15 and 29 (hereafter youth) dominate in terms of social media usage (ITU, 2022; We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023), and are thus most likely to be informed on, and ready to tackle, its misuse (weaponisation) when offered sufficient training and support (Council of Europe, 2018; EC, 2022c). Practically, the weaponisation of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, X, TikTok, Telegram, YouTube, WhatsApp), and their influence on conflict settings, is made evident through increasingly frequent and sophisticated misinformation and disinformation campaigns.

Mis- and disinformation campaigns, which often occur within the SN in tandem with a restricted mainstream media environment and the censorship of opposing views (Byman, 2022), thrive on emerging or ongoing conflicts (Proctor, 2021). Examples of this threat-oriented application can be seen through a number of MENA-localised Russian disinformation campaigns which have sought to elicit distrust in Western governments

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(OECD, 2022), or, more prominently, the media confusion generated as a result of the Israel-Palestine conflict (Burnett, Farrell, & Vyas, 2023). From Kremlin falsehoods on Ukrainian aggression and the dangers of democracy (Janadze, 2022) to numerous manufactured images of carnage or fake statements and videos implicating world leaders or their governments in the events occurring in Gaza (Associated Press, 2023), social media complicates the management and prevention of further conflict. Consequently, conflict resolution and related policies require a more distinct digital lens which involves primary (digital) media users, namely young people.

Significantly, despite abuses in the direction of radicalisation, violence and mis/disinformation, social media embodies a strong potential for promoting peace and understanding conflict dynamics (Bunse, 2021). With practical implementations like fostering coordination and awareness on the kidnapping of girls by Boko Haram (#BringBackOurGirls) (Konnolly, 2015), and soliciting views on Colombian and Libyan peace processes through digital consultations (Lanz & Eleiba, 2018), digital media tools offer new approaches to solving and managing conflict. Moreover, these technologies offer a clear pathway for youth involvement in conflict resolution and the possibility for broader improvements in peace-building processes in the SN with the inclusion of a digitally informed demographic. Simply put, social media can be instrumentalised in the dimension of youth-led conflict resolution to tackle the growing trend of mis- and disinformation campaigns and stem their influence in fragile settings.

Overall, this policy brief seeks to present the potential of social media as a peace-building instrument wielded by young media users in the SN with the aim of going beyond the conventional policy view of social media as a threat. Key to this brief is the reorientation of young people as active conflict stakeholders through a revised application of media/digital literacy and mis- and disinformation countermeasures. This brief will be structured in four parts. In the first section, youth will be introduced as an active conflict stakeholder, and the current state of the SN's online connectivity will be explored with reference to its ongoing digital transition. In the second section, this brief will evaluate the current trajectory of EU-SN policies and regulations under the umbrella of youth media literacy, mis- and disinformation, and the digital transition. In the third section, challenges and practical approaches to implementing social media in a peace-building capacity will be explored concisely with consideration to the SN policy context. Finally, a number of policy recommendations will be provided under the premise of sensibly linking investments in youth (digital) media literacy and conflict resolution through social media.

## **Background: youth, security, digitalisation**

### **Young people as agents of peace and security**

Young people, as a growing and well-informed online demographic, are a powerful but undervalued agent in conflict resolution and peace-building. Generally, there has been a shifting (EC, 2021a), but persistent, base perception of young people as passive victims, minor perpetrators/troublemakers, or widely "othered" conflict actors (UN, 2018). This view is detrimental to effective conflict resolution, and fails to recognise the youth as essential partners in building peace within their communities (Luu & Rausch, 2017), especially when considering that the leveraging of new technologies towards peace requires the inclusion of their main users: youth (UNITAR, 2020; UNDP, 2021).

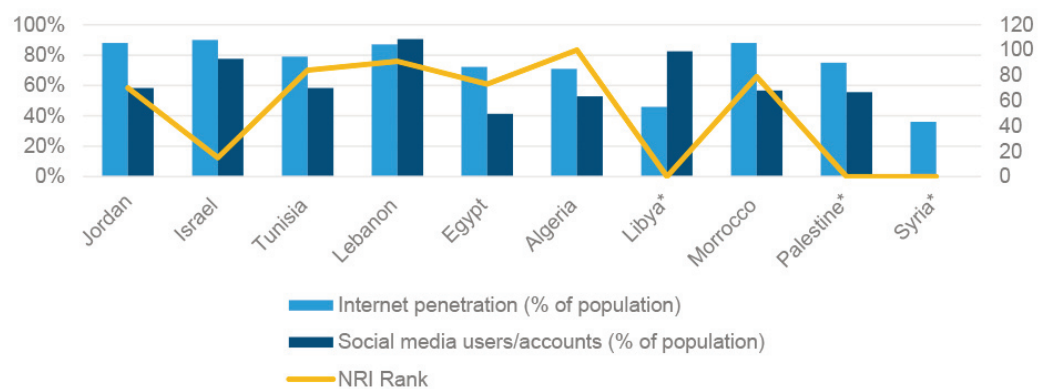
Evidence suggests that young people can be strong contributors to sustainable peace-building initiatives in their ability to address the challenges of physical, structural and

cultural violence through innovative approaches, particularly under the banner of digital peace (Ozerdem, 2016; UN, 2023). Such abilities are based on their specialised knowledge of the local context, occasional firsthand experiences with violence, and understanding of the historical developments behind the conflict(s) they seek to tackle (Oosterom, 2018). Moreover, with the tendency of social media to increasingly frame the nature of conflicts, their conduct and their violent escalation (Proctor, 2021), young people are advantaged by their strong access to, and proficiency with, social media platforms (EC, 2018; Howard et al., 2021). Young people are further advantaged by the growing investment in (youth) digital literacy and skills globally (ITU, 2022), and the contributory effects this can have on social media usage in a context where conflict resolution and peace-building initiatives increasingly require a strengthened digital lens (Lanz & Eleiba, 2018).

### Digital transition in the Southern Neighbourhood: bounded optimism

Practically, comprehensive investment in national and individual digital capacities is becoming more apparent in the SN and broader MENA region as a result of numerous digital inclusion initiatives (Komati, Abboud, & Mukaddam, 2022), and long-term investments by international donors like the EU and United States (US) (EC, 2021b; USAID, 2020). Markedly, a larger focus on the digital development of the region's youth is vital when appreciating the demographic characteristics of the SN. In 2022, youth (aged 15-29) was seen to make up nearly 30% of the population, while high-income countries in other parts of the world averaged around 15% by comparison (ILO, 2022). Moreover, estimates show that around 75% of global youth (aged 15-24) use the internet (10% higher than the rest of the population), with this number growing to 80% [12% higher than the rest of the population] when observing the connectivity of young people in the MENA region (ITU, 2022).

**Figure 1.** Digitalisation & connectivity metrics: Southern Neighbourhood



Sources: World Bank, International Telecommunication Union, Portulans Institute, Digital 2023 Global Overview Report

Overall, there is a distinct uptick in internet penetration within the SN, with Figure 1 providing a snapshot of the region's level of connectivity in 2023. In addition to a higher portion of the population being connected to the internet as compared to previous years (ITU, 2021; ITU, 2022), considerable segments of the SN population are using social media, or are registered for at least one social media account (We Are Social &

Meltwater, 2023). Nevertheless, despite stated improvements in connectivity, and ambitions to invest in digital inclusion, digitalisation levels in the SN, as assessed by the Network Readiness Index<sup>1</sup> (NRI), remain quite modest (Portulans Institute, 2022). With the exception of Israel (ranked 15), SN countries rank between 70 (Jordan) and 100 (Algeria), which places them in the lower bottom ranks of the NRI. Noticeably, a number of conflict-affected and post-conflict countries are reasonably not represented, and widely demonstrate low internet penetration metrics.

Moreover, enduring inequalities in the SN hamper technological progress and demonstrate a need for expanded support under the backdrop of effective digitalisation. SN countries continue to require support due to disparities in male/female digital inclusion, lagging media literacy skills, and major divides between urban and rural populations (ITU, 2022; Komati, Abboud & Mukaddam, 2022). These challenges are largely recognised, and several national and international initiatives are in place to undertake their correction, specifically on the EU-SN policy dimension. In this regard, the next sections of this brief will evaluate major policies under the umbrella of youth media literacy, mis- and disinformation, and the general SN digital transition with the goal of pointing out effective linkages towards the end of sustainable youth-led conflict resolution through social media.

## **Policy investments in digitalisation and the digital transition**

Digital media literacy has become a priority with the systematic dissemination of mis- and disinformation through social media platforms (EC, 2022b; EC, 2022c). In line with this perceived threat, the EU and individual member states have implemented various policies and regulations aiming to prioritise media education and promote the willingness and ability of people to consume and share information in a responsible manner.

Investments towards promoting youth media literacy directed at, or influencing, the SN are the result of focal policies and initiatives concentrated around the digital transition. As a whole, the digital transition of the SN is identified as a key policy area in the EU's Joint Communication on a "Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood - A new agenda for the Mediterranean" (EC, 2021a) (hereafter Joint Communication). In support of this, investment in the digital sector is also named as a key area of the EU's Global Gateway strategy (EC, 2021c), and as a goal in the EU's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) - Global Europe, which finances a number of digital projects and initiatives under the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the SN (EC, 2021b).

The aforementioned policies mainly propose digitalisation as a pathway towards the development of the economic sector. Yet, their contribution to the development of digital skills and youth media literacy serves both as a vehicle towards economic growth and the broader digital resilience of the population. Framed along the themes of human development and seizing the digital transition, the Joint Communication has plainly recognised the need to empower young people, and, in turn, it has made a commitment to support their digital education at all levels. Despite this stated commitment, fostering digital skills or literacy as a mode of tackling mis- and disinformation is not an immediate goal. Media literacy is proposed through capacity-building schemes that indirectly tackle

<sup>1</sup> The Network Readiness Index assesses the degree of readiness/preparedness of countries to make use of opportunities offered by information and communication technologies. The index builds rankings based on technological development, productive access by the population, government regulation, and impact of network technology adoption.

issues of mis- and disinformation, as made clear by the Erasmus+ programme (EC, 2021a). Moreover, the cited 2021-2027 Digital Education Action Plan also links fostering digital literacy by educators to tackling disinformation, albeit with a focus on the European continent and EU citizens (EC, 2020).

In terms of direct reference, neither the Joint Communication nor the EIP or the Global Gateway Strategy connect youth media literacy to actively countering mis- and disinformation in the SN. Noting the economic dimension underlying digitalisation in these policies, mis- and disinformation are alternatively approached from either a governance or peace and security perspective. In this policy context, disinformation and misinformation are essentially viewed as a risk within a broader group of cyber threats that target critical infrastructure and political stability (EC, 2021a), or as issues that can be tackled through strategic communication and further investment in the skills of civil society organizations (CSOs) (EC, 2021b). However, within the same theme of peace and security, there is a clear appreciation for the role played by young people in peace-building. This is made clear by the EU's explicit ambition to support a stronger implementation of the UN Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda on a regional and international level (EC, 2021a; UNSCR 2250, 2015). Taking this interpretation of youth as a bridge, improved (digital) media literacy can be sensibly linked to countering mis- and disinformation through social media.

### **Bridging digital skills and mis- and disinformation countermeasures**

At the current stage, much of the EU's work on the SN's digital transition within the framework of the Joint Communication and related policies is still in early development, but a strong foundation exists for empowering a digitally-minded youth in the spheres of peace and security as active contributors to conflict resolution processes. Building on the EU's commitment to implementing the YPS agenda, there is room to initiate projects that harness the intention to include youth in peace-building as part of the increasingly pertinent context of tackling online mis- and disinformation.

Internally, the EU has made great strides in restricting mis- and disinformation from a content perspective through tailored countermeasures (i.e., building information directories, fact-checking initiatives, data-exchanges, debunking) (EC, 2022b). Additional measures have also sought to create a healthier media ecosystem. Primary examples of this include the 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, which targets the distribution of false content online (EC, 2022a), and the media literacy-oriented Digital Education Action Plan (EC, 2020). Noticeably, this education plan is referenced in the Joint Communication, yet the degree of its implementation is limited, with several proposed measures within this plan, or interlinked with its ambition to tackle mis- and disinformation, being largely inappropriate when applied in the SN context (Sleibi, 2022).

Alternatively, the EU has also embraced a robust strategy to counter mis- and disinformation externally. This process has been spearheaded by the European External Action Service (EEAS) Strategic Communication Division and its Task Forces (SG.STRAT.2) (Task Force South in the case of the SN). The primary mandate of Task Force South is to strengthen strategic communication on EU policy actions in the MENA region, but its secondary aim of fostering healthier information communities can be broadened (EEAS, 2021b). Beyond strengthening strategic communication, Task Force South also supports independent media in the region and works to reinforce civil society resilience in the face of mis- and disinformation, as well as interference. A stronger focus on youth involvement in this dimension could prove vital towards a more wholesale



approach of combating mis- and disinformation. Specifically, framing resilience-building along the lines of digital media literacy in a peace and security context would allow the EU to leverage a growing and influential online demographic, and create stronger links between CSOs and the youth.

Furthermore, the Task Force expanded its social media operations with the appointment of an SN Regional Media Officer, which allowed the EU to widen its proactive communications on online platforms like X and Instagram (EEAS, 2021a). Although such an implementation is mainly oriented around improving and localising the EU's strategic communication, it creates an opportunity for a firm collaboration between digitally active SN youth and the EU. A decisive part of fostering such a relationship is empowering the youth to act as digital conflict stakeholders. The next section will seek to explore this assertion by proposing the role of social media as a peace-building instrument in the hands of young people.

## **Social media as a peace-building instrument**

Fundamentally, mis- and disinformation campaigns occurring on social media pose the danger of exacerbating societal divisions and being a breeding ground for extremism (Bunse, 2021). Noting aforementioned examples like the false portrayal of the White Helmets as terrorists (Mercy Corps, 2019), and the manufactured images of carnage in the Israel-Palestine conflict (Associated Press, 2023), another prominent illustration is seen in the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and its capitalisation on the reach of digital communication technologies to recruit, incite violence, and spread propaganda (Lanz & Eleiba, 2018). Nonetheless, the capacity of social media for extremism, inciting violence and escalating emerging conflicts can be mitigated. Principally, this brief explores this mitigation through the alternate potential of social media as a peace-building instrument for a digitally empowered youth to counter mis- and disinformation. With this in mind, this section will concisely present a use-case for social media as a counter-messaging tool.

When viewed as a counter-messaging tool, social media offers unique opportunities to directly shape narratives before they can be weaponised, or to temper extremist content from its onset. Moreover, when used in this capacity, social media allows for more influential and accurate strategic communication in the face of false narratives. At their core, mis- and disinformation campaigns construct false narratives by exploiting tensions and societal polarisation to create a compelling emotional effect (Asmolov, 2019). Through integrated features, media platforms push users to take ownership over shocking content, even when it is misleading or false; users are incentivised to endorse, personalise, modify and share disinformation messages that match their worldview (Matasick, Alfonsi, & Bellantoni, 2020). This mechanism is further complicated by an over reliance on social media for up-to-date news, as seen in the SN (al-Tahat, 2021), and a restricted media environment where populations have little trust in their traditional media institutions (Byman, 2022).

Nevertheless, it is essential to emphasise that mis- and disinformation campaigns are user-driven. On the one hand, social media users are incentivised to spread sensational (false) content due to integrated algorithmic features; on the other, users are well-placed to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and narratives through the democratised process of content creation offered by social media platforms (Brown & Livingston, 2019). In effect, involving local communities, specifically youth, in the development and production of messaging allows for a more conflict-sensitive approach to communication, which unites rather than divides people in their digital ecosystem (International Alert, 2020), and diminishes the impact of mis- and disinformation.

In essence, social media can be a bridge between local and national spheres, and as a result can exert significant political influence. Social media can link civil society and activists to the general public, or user-generated content to mainstream mass media channels, or simply chronicle local struggles to be viewed by an international audience (International Alert, 2020). Yet, in the midst of this mass flow of information, instances of mis- and disinformation are likely to propagate if safeguards are not in place. As noted throughout this brief, media literacy is essential towards ensuring that false narratives have limited reach. More importantly, tailored digital literacy programmes ensure that key online users like young people can temper the irresponsible sharing of online content.

## Conclusions and recommendations

All in all, young people have the potential to act as an important bulwark against the weaponisation of social media (Proctor, 2021), and can feasibly work to mitigate the dangers of mis- and disinformation in their communities. This is especially true when allowing for improved collaboration between youth activities and frontline policies. From a policy perspective, the key to effective threat mitigation is viewing (conflict) prevention as a long-term social investment rather than as a limited intervention prior to the violent act(s). In practice, this would involve a direct investment in youth media (digital) literacy with a long-term peace and security objective. Primarily, this brief aims at reinforcing the EU's intention to apply the YPS agenda, and calls for a consequent integration of youth into peace-building projects, directly associating such projects with media literacy programmes. In this regard, social media has been presented as a viable tool in this dimension of youth inclusion. However, this brief also offers the following recommendations to create room for such application of social media by SN youth in conflict resolution processes:

- 1. Expanding the scope of funding and logistical support.** EU ministries and member states should maintain their collaborative efforts with the SN and expand funding for initiatives falling under digital inclusion within frameworks such as the Joint Communication, Task Force South, the Global Gateway Strategy, and the EIP. Additionally, this would mean expanding programming plans on digital transitions, and specifically youth media literacy, to more SN countries. In line with this, the provision of direct logistical or financial support for on-the-ground initiatives and projects under the themes of "youth vs disinformation" or "youth media literacy" by CSOs would be crucial towards fostering an independent culture of young people who consume and share online information responsibly.
- 2. Promoting young people as conflict stakeholders in the digital domain.** Taking into account that young people (aged 15-29) are seen to make up nearly 30% of the SN population, and are an influential online demographic in the SN digital space, their role as active conflict stakeholders should be endorsed. Such an implementation would fall within the EU's decision to support the YPS agenda, and could manifest as wide-ranging EU-sponsored digital peace-building masterclasses. As a practical implementation, the "United Creatives" initiative sponsored by the EU's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) can be echoed in the SN to encourage proactive and creative youth to design digital campaigns that offer alternatives to mis- and disinformation, both online and in their local communities (UNDP, 2021).
- 3. Pursuing constructive engagement with young audiences through popular social media platforms.** Consistent communication with young audiences and prominent (youth) content-creators could allow for the creation of an EU-friendly online-offline network, particularly given the over reliance of SN audiences on social media for news

and information (al-Tahat, 2021). Practically, collaboration with young media users should be administered by the EEAS, and encouraged by the (Arabic-speaking) office of the SN Regional Media Officer. Additionally, the EU/EEAS can take some inspiration from the US government's approach to briefing TikTok, YouTube, and X content-creators on the Russia-Ukraine war in a manner not dissimilar to the briefings it conducts with traditional journalists (Lorenz, 2022). In principle, the EU can expand its scope of outreach to platforms/forums which are popular in the SN and gain an early foothold. Engagement with young media users could also extend to providing practical advice and training on effective content creation, particularly with the objectives of leadership development, peace-building and social cohesion.



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