



**THE MAKING OF ‘REFUGEE YOUTH’:
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDAS ON YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY IN
THE MIDDLE EAST**

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The global migration crisis today sprouting out of the Middle East cannot be understood without taking into account the history and process through which ‘refugee’ and ‘youth’ as social categories are formed. Youth of the Middle East are seen as resources and investments, with prospects of becoming agents of American democracy in the Middle East. International development agendas have been implanted in the Middle East through funding first women and later youth organizations mandated to work on issues related to youth leadership and civic engagement, economic and social empowerment of women, and freedom of speech, human rights, and democracy. Furthermore, international development actors and organizations such as the World Bank, International Labor Organization (ILO), and various bodies of the United Nations and US State Department framed youth as the solution to political and economic turmoil in the Middle East. Foreign-funded development organizations and programs focused on youth leadership training in democracy building and civic engagement, as well as government-led adaptation of post-secondary education models that caters to labour market demands under the banner of building democratic citizenry in the Middle East, served to depoliticize women’s and human rights’ demands and mass mobilizing efforts by forcing them into organizational structures isolated from communities and with limited impact on the State’s policies. This social phenomenon that arose in the Middle East in the early 1990s has been named by scholars as the ‘NGOization’ of mass-based movements. This paper examines the impact of youth development agendas on the construction of ‘youth’ as a social category and how that has shaped the experiences and discourse of youth in the Middle East. It also argues that the emergence of ‘refugee youth’ as a sub-category of ‘youth’ is an evolution of the trajectory of youth development agendas in the Middle East.

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