TACKLING RADICALIZATION AMONG THE YOUTHS IN LIBYA

By: Michael **Asiedu·**

Introduction

"Sometimes I feel I am more relevant on the streets in Tripoli than in decision making processes that shape my country (Libya)" – (Asharaf, Libyan youth).

The marginalization of Libyan youths has contributed to a much larger extent their propensity to be radicalized. In 2011, Libyan youths both armed and unarmed formed the fulcrum of the Libyan revolution (Luhrmann, 2015). They were clear in their demands, "*Gaddafi must go*". They fought and laid down their arms in hope for better prospects post-Gaddafi; to be included in Libya's body politic fully. This was however, not to be. This desolation has prompted many Libyan youths who supported the revolution against former Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi to feel dejected in retrospect.

An assessment of Libya's first transitional elections in July 2012 brings to the fore a more poignant conclusion. Political representation of youths in Libya appeared larger in the revolution period than in official institutions post-Gaddafi (Luhrmann, 2013).

Currently there are three rival governments[1], each battling for control. The current shift in terms of political representation excludes Libyan youths in the narrative, hence, they resort

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to where they are relatively relevant, the streets. Libya's ailing economy and other attendant challenges such as youth unemployment and the quest for youth fighters in the different militias in the country have also not helped.

Tackling radicalization in Libya means coming to terms with the fact that the leaders who aided the plunging of the country into its current bedlam are not the only ones that offer a path to stabilization. Meaningful and effective political participation of youths can make significant difference, in that they feel worthwhile, their views matter.

"If I were in Libya now, I will be radicalized not because I want to but because I feel deceived, left out of the process altogether" – (Asharaf, Libyan youth).

At present few youth forums exist let alone political inclusion processes of youth in Libya. Tackling radicalization among Libyan youth requires admitting twice as much; youths matter, youths must be involved, and this will require a youth policy in post-Gaddafi Libya amidst all the turmoil.

This paper attempts to look at alternatives in tackling radicalization among the youths in Libya. It is divided into four parts, the first part argue why there should be more youth forums in Libya, the second part takes stock of some of the youth forums that have happened so far in Libya as well as the broader MENA region. In advocating the need for youth forums as a contributor to the de-radicalization fight, the third part considers how certain initiatives aided the de-radicalization of some MENA youth. The final part suggests some options for youth inclusion as well as some alternatives for policy consideration as the quest for a government that is fully acceptable by the Libyan people continues.

The need for youth forums in Libya

At present there is a lot of disappointment in Tripoli, Benghazi, Misurata and many parts of Libya among numerous youths. It is envisaged that youth forums will provide a platform that is helpful in

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[1] Three rival governments are currently vying for control of post-Gaddafi Libya. Two rivals are in Tripoli with one being the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). The GNA has struggled to establish its authority following the 2015 Skhirat Agreement (See Asiedu, 2017). In part due to the refusal of authorities controlling eastern Libya to accept the GNA as Libya's formal government (Abdessadok, 2017).

varied ways, some of which include: enabling youth to meet like-minded colleagues to deliberate on issues that affect them and the country at large. Of intrinsic value is that, such platforms provide a recognisable voice for the youths. It encourages constructive discussions and ensure their voices are in the limelight. It will provide assurance that at least there is a focus on their struggles. The more youth forums, the more likely media attention will be directed in terms of coverage. Increasingly, the youths will be gaining a more broader space in the limelight of Libyan politics. This will inextricably lead to a more inclusive approach of the youth in Libya's politics.

Past youth forums in Libya

Youth forums in Libya have been far and wide. There was the first Leadership Forum for Libyan youth by the Qatar-based Silatech in partnership with Libyan National Transitional Council and the Benghazi Local Council in 2012, which gathered over 300 Libyan youths. It was the first post-revolution youth gathering to take place (Gulf Times, 2012). Since this forum, there have been rarely any significant forum of notice – mainly due to the situation in the country, nonetheless there have been regional programmes such as the British Council led Young Arab Voices (YAV), Young Arab Analysts Network International (YAANI) and the Khalini Nakhtar ("Let me choose"), (Hewaidi, 2014). Grassroots activism by youth groups also exist notable among them include the Libya Women and Youth Forum – a group that has recently demanded active participation of Libyan youths in the country's politics (Zaptia, 2016). The problem with the regional programs although laudable is that they are not country specific and fall into the sort of generalizations that end up in measuring many Arab youths with the same yardstick. Again, they are difficult to measure and sustain.

Some regional initiatives that has contributed to de-radicalization among Arab youths

A significant example that has seen some short-term impact in Jordan in tackling radicalization and will definitely see sustainable long-term results if pursued is the "Luring Youth Away from Radicalization" 12-week training programme by Mercy Corps. The 12-week course provides leadership training, local job placement, rock-climbing instruction and lessons on controlling one's emotions. This programme focuses directly on the youths – instantly a sense of worth of the individual is brought to the fore. For instance, Ahmad enrolled with his friend Omar, both 19 years old. Prior to enrolment, they easily engaged in fights and indicated the sight of blood as the only

thing that calmed them down. A program leader, Monther Altiti, who had had similar experiences demonstrated how he used nature in helping him stop, he, thus, took particular interest in Ahmad and wanted him to find the same sense of ease too through training methods such as hiking, climbing etc. (Su, 2017).

Another project worth mentioning is the EU-funded project in Morocco called, "Radicalism, no thank you". This project targets youths between the ages of 15 and 29 who are vulnerable to extremist discourse and radicalization. It intervenes by organizing training activities that include training, mentoring, cultural and educational activities and personal development (European Union, 2016).

On the other hand, the experiences of Salafi youths in Tunisia on radicalization and de-radicalization via series of interviews also present an interesting insight. For instance, it was not a change in government policy or NGO interventions that culminated in their de-radicalization but rather their own involvements with jihadi groups. The refusal to engage in violence according to one interviewee was due to the lack of support from fellow radical Salafis when he was released from prison. Another interviewee indicated that he reconsidered the politics of salafism after he was threatened from within jihadi organizations pursuant to his reluctance in using violence (Siebenaler and Zabelina, 2017). Essentially, de-radicalization among Salafi youths came from within – personal reflection from their involvement with such groups – this reflection was motivated by the changing social and political context in Tunisia, sadly this is not reflective of Libya.

Alternatives for consideration - how Libyan youths could be more involved in policy-making

The Libyan Political Agreement (LPA)

An enduring solution in tackling radicalization pertains first and foremost to the stability of Libya. This means the Libyan Political Agreement which is currently at a standstill needs to be reconsidered. Stability in Libya largely hinges on its security sector, to this end, central security actors whose prominence have increased since the signing of the Skhirat Agreement (LPA) – and were missing at the negotiation table – should be invited to renegotiate (Asiedu, 2017). Key among them is General Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army. Renegotiating will ensure that there is a march for a unified Libyan Army since the absence of a unified army is one of the embers that fires

the onward radicalisation of some Libyan youths. Rival militias in Libya need constant recruits to shore up their strength and defence systems and youths are mostly relied on.

Much is required on the diplomatic front too, western countries should commit towards preventing the radicalisation of Libyan youths and this means pushing for a fresh platform of negotiations for the main armed groups in western Libya and to plan a roadmap for de-escalation in Sirte and Benghazi. US, Russia, Qatar and UAE and other western countries should push towards a policy framework that is inclusive of the current security concerns as currently there are three rival governments, each battling for authority in Libya – with Ageelah Saleh leader of the HoR indicating his intention to call for elections in 2018. Recently, there have been attempts at reconciliation with the latest being the hosting of talks at Paris in July by French President Emmanuel Macron between UN-backed Government of National Accord Leader Fayez al-Serraj and eastern Libyan Commander Khalifa Hafter.[2] The resolution of the political situation in Libya is key – only then can meaningful youth policies or programmes towards youth de-radicalization be rolled out and sustained.

Imams, religious and tribal heads in Libya

Considering that many Libyan youths and to a broader extent Muslim youths find validation in the profession of their faith; their religious leaders notably imams become key figures in shaping their outlooks. In this regard and given incidents of radicalization of youths that "sometimes" have its offshoot from Mosques, the significance of imams in tackling radicalization among Libyan youths becomes two-fold. First, imams are held in high esteem as religious leaders, so they have enormous influence and can preach the perils of radicalization whilst entrenching the peaceful nature of Islam among youths. At present imams have not been really made aware of the platform they have in shaping some of the religious views of Libyan youths. To this end, a national forum for imams in Libya will do well to sensitize them on the role they can play in tackling radicalism among Libyan youths.

There is also the need for the inclusion of imams in civil societies' dialogues and workshops so that their influence does not remain solely within the confines of mosques. In fact, in terms of peace education a heavy load falls on the shoulders of imams. Essentially, preventing radicalization among

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[2] "The cause of peace has made great progress today," declared Macron at the end of the talks (Stephen and Wintour, 2017).

Libyan youths could best be approached via the religious lens which puts imams and other religious and tribal leaders at the epicentre of this mission (CSID Report, 2017). Given the unique role imams play they must start churning out new and compelling messages to convey to young Libyans. Tribal leaders are also key because they exert significant influence among their people including the youths. For instance, in attempts at securing Libya's southern border, the Italian Interior Ministry resorted to the cooperation of tribal leaders of the Tuareg of south-western Libya, the Toubou of Southeast as well as the Arab tribe of Awlad Suleiman(Middle East Monitor, 2017).

Specialised youth committees

A direct inculcation of the youths in the political and decision-making process is also necessary to demonstrate to Libyan youths that they are vital actors in Libyan politics. It may include: specialized youth committees that are attached to each government ministry; essentially, with this set-up they can be consulted and engaged in each ministry's decision-making on a regular basis. A more direct approach could also be the allocation of a minimum number of seats to qualified individuals under the age of thirty-five to serve in executive committees of political parties. There could also be a recognised youth arm that participates in all negotiations in Libya – this could be extended to countries in conflict and transition too – this is particularly a cultural problem[3]. On the whole, a special youth ministry will not be unheard of, however, it gives the impression that youths should be treated as a distinct group rather than their incorporation in ministries of state.

These measures are necessary because at present youths in Libya have been surgically cut out, for instance, within the National Transitional Council (NTC), Fathi Terbil was the only youth representative (Murphy 2011). Terbil was also the only youth involved in the interim government of Adrrahim El-keib after the liberation of Tripoli, however, he had little or no influence in the decision-making apparatus within.

According to a World Value Survey on the societal position of youths in Libya, 62 percent of respondents indicate that youths below their 20s are placed in a low position in society. 61 percent

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[3] There is also a clash of generations in Libya and most Arab countries. The paternalistic, top-down ways of the older demographic and the anti-hierarchy pro-innovation ways of the newer demographic. A bridge reconciling these generations has yet been made coherently (Hewaidi, 2014).

also said they would place people in their 40s at a higher position, significantly though 69 percent of the respondents indicated that most people in Libya will accept a suitably qualified 30 year old if he or she was appointed their leader. Additionally, 65 percent agreed that the old had too much political influence in Libya (Drissi, 2014).

The underlining factor in terms of the predicament of Libyan youths is that both during and after the revolution the important role the youths played in the streets and in the militia was not translated into important roles in formal decision-making bodies. The restrained political role of youths could also be ascribed to the patriarchal social constrains in the societal environment which gives restricted room to the equal participation of youths and women. For instance, the transition from childhood to adulthood in the MENA region is often regarded as a period of "waithood". The Libyan society is also divided into tribal, religious and regional, with each having distinct authority (Lacher, 2013).

Conceptual Aspect of Youth Inclusion

Finally, there is also a conceptual aspect in tackling radicalization among youths in Libya. Currently there is no existing blueprint for cultivating young leaders in Libya and to a larger extent certain countries in the MENA region especially within the educational structures. Lack of young leadership programmes open the youths up to external influences. A government that will be agreed upon by the Libyan people after overcoming the current crisis must develop a merit-based culture of youth training and engagement in the political sphere. This could be achieved through the development of internship programs, cohesive training programs for young professionals and youth-targeted public policy seminars to raise political awareness (Hewaidi, 2014).

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