



2014 Tunisian-Libyan Youth Forum From dialogue to action



The Tunisian-Libyan Youth Forum was held in Tunis from December 15 to 18, 2014. The forum is an initiative of UNESCO (as part of its NET-MED Youth Project, supported by the European Union), ACTED (project manager of the Civil Initiatives Libya project), and UNDP, with the financial support of the European Union and SIDA. The forum is co-organized by Attawasul (Libya), We Love Sousse (Tunisia) and the Anna Lindh Foundation.

«I cannot sit still while my country rushes to disaster. Enough of the speeches, we need to act! What will future generations think of us if we do nothing? We are accountable to history!» Those were the words called out by a young Libyan man at the Tunisian-Libyan Youth Forum organized in Tunis, Tunisia, from December 15 to 17, 2014, by Civil Initiatives Libya (CIL), UNESCO (NET-MED Youth Project) and UNDP, in cooperation with Attawasul (Libyan organization), We Love Sousse (Tunisian organization), and Anna Lindh Foundation.

The crisis in Libya having polarized the event, it appeared crucial to bring about a rapid, meaningful and effective shift “from dialogue to action”. Some may have doubted whether it was possible for the forum to be held in such an emergency, but they were mistaken. Dialogue is, in itself, a form of action. It involves meeting “the other”, those that one has never met and can learn from, and even those that one has never wanted to meet and can begin to understand. The young Tunisians discovered the young Libyans to be bright and clear-sighted yet isolated, while the latter, for their part, benefited from the former’s experience in many areas of civil society. Similarities and differences came to light, points of complementarity emerged as well. Joint efforts were initiated and projects were outlined.

Meanwhile, young Libyans from Tripoli, Misrata, Benghazi and other cities had the chance to talk to, listen to and understand each other, resolve sticking points, forge links and work together on their country’s future. Dialogue makes concrete actions possible. “There are a number of things that we can do,” said Michael Croft, Head of the UNESCO Office in Tripoli. “We have quite a lot of experience and we have a platform, UNESCO’s NET-MED Youth project which aims at encouraging youth engagement and participation in the current Libyan context. There is so much that you can do, too. You are very familiar with the actual circumstances; you have ideas and solutions that have not occurred to us. Find them, put them forward and we will be able to help you implement them.” ■



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Interacting



Alaa Murabit (above, centre), Raja el Abasi (above, right) and Sabrine Ghoubantini (opposite) discussing civil society, the media and youth engagement with young activists.

Over the course of the forum

They did not come. Some Libyan participants had been held up at the border by the fighting and their bus had had to turn back to Tripoli. Others did not come, and never will, because they have been killed, murdered for their engagement. The forum opened with a minute of silence in their memory – especially that of Tawfik Bensaoud – their comrades' tears and the deep feelings of one and all. Libya is at war, and being an activist in Libyan civil society is a high-risk activity. The forum organizers – Michael Croft for UNESCO, Selva Ramachandran for UNDP and Hisham Werfalli for CIL – together with the European Union ambassador Nataliya Apostolova all stressed the need to continue working together, more than ever, to support the efforts of civil society youth in Libya. They are, more than ever, the country's future. The forum, established by organi-

zations working in and for Libya, therefore turned attention clearly to Libya's problems from the outset.

Libya's perilous instability, and uncertain future were in stark contrast to the situation in Tunisia, where the end of its four-year transition was now being marked by a democratic presidential election. Tunisian youth activists had been extensively involved in the process

Tawfik Bensaoud was a Benghazi activist who worked with Attawasul. "He was younger than me," reveals Fathia, "but I was always asking his advice." Bright and highly motivated, he soon made his mark as a leading figure of Libyan civil society. He was murdered last September. "Why him?", wonder Nur and Nada. "When he died we realized that every one of us is a target."

“My message for Libyan youth is this: you have the power and you can make changes. You just have to seize opportunities and act”.

Tawfik Bensaoud (02/24/1996 - 09/19/2015)

From left to right: Sami Hourani, Makki Helal, Marwan Maalouf and Youssef Qahwaji open the “fishbowl” session on the media, civil society and engagement. Anyone wishing to speak can take the podium. Everything is noted down.



through setting up associations, their participation in the drafting of a new constitution and even, at times, their political engagement.

“We keep on seeking help from Western countries without looking to our neighbours,” said Hisham Werfalli, director of CIL. *“Tunisia has a culture and an outlook that resemble those of Libya. But they have emerged from the transition phase in which Libya is stuck. They could help us.”*

“Our impression is that the Libyans are at the same stage as we were four years ago,” added Hela Boujne. *“Yes, we can help them in quite a few ways.”*



Notwithstanding the contrasting scenarios in the two countries, the organizers managed to identify three common themes that formed the focus of the debate from the first morning:

- Civil society in times of instability (moderator: Alaa Murabit, The Voice of Libyan Women);
- Media use during crisis (moderator: Raja el Abasi, UNESCO Office in Libya);
- Youth and civic engagement (moderator: Sabrine Ghoubantini, Nida Tounes).

The following afternoon brought facilitators and participants together in a “fishbowl” session where anyone wishing to express their views on a subject came up to the podium then gave the floor to the next person when they had finished.

The second day was devoted to workshops on more or less the same themes:

- Media and youth (moderator: Marwan Maalouf, Menapolis, Lebanon);
- Activities of youth organizations during transition (moderator: Youssef Qahwaji, Action Aid, Jordan);
- Engagement in civic dialogue (moderator: Sami Hourani, Leaders of Tomorrow, Jordan).

Participants divided into groups and each group partook in the three workshops one after the other. *“It was during the workshops that we really had a chance to meet the Libyan activists,”* said Ben Yaala Sami, sponsorship manager





All of the activists participated in the three workshops: Media and youth (with Marwan Maalouf), Activities of youth organizations during transition (with Youssef Qahwaji) and Engagement in civic dialogue (with Sami Hourani).



of Tun'Act. "This forum is really worthwhile as we generally have little interaction with the Libyans and, hence, quite a few prejudices. As a matter of fact, I was amazed by some of them. It also made me aware of the enormous mismatch between my country and theirs. They are at war. The story of that young woman, who told us that she had taken up arms and killed people, made a particular impression on me. We, for our part, are novices. War is a totally unfamiliar field of negotiation for us. They never know whether what they are doing will be lasting. It is like having to cross a motorway with no visibility every single day."

Troughout the interactions of the first day and the workshops on the second, the young Tunisian activists applauded the standard of the interventions made by the young Libyans. "They are not short of ideas," observed Hela Boujneh, of the Association de Défense des Droits de

l'Homme (ADDH). "They know what they want and have a highly relevant view of what is happening in their country. These young people are neither clueless nor lost. There is a determination to change things. The tools and techniques are what they are lacking." Her appraisal tallies with that of Aly Bouzwida of the Tunisian web platform Jamaity.org: "The potential is there. The issues are being discussed but none of the solutions and plans for change are being implemented. Libya has had no civil society, no civic education or anything."

The Tunisians, experienced activists, most of whom already knew each other and had already been trained at a good many workshops, were taking part in the forum mainly to discover their Libyan neighbours, to expand their networks, increase the scope of their modes of action and emerge from their own country's context. By contrast, the Libyans – isolated, poorly trained, in an emergency

Learning

"Youth problems have no borders. We want to forge ahead. It is a new era, there is a fresh energy and quick thinking; that is what really marks out our generation."

Hela Boujne



situation and, more often than not, meeting their compatriots for the first time – set much store by the ferment of ideas in the debates and the techniques tackled in the workshops. While appreciating the help and receptiveness of the Tunisian youth, they were also there to forge links with their own people and to learn. *"Any opportunity must be seized,"* said Nur from Benghazi, *"because that is the key to everything."*

Time was limited, especially for the workshops. *"Outlining the issues and trying to draw parallels between Libyan and Tunisian realities in one and a half hour is no easy matter,"* lamented Aly Bouzwida.

The lack of youth engagement in civil society and political life (under 6% and under 2%, respectively, in Tunisia) soon emerged as the main issue that they had in common. *"That,"* according to Hela Boujne, *"is because*

the system is unappealing. You have to be won over by something before you can believe in it. On top of that, in Libya, there is the problem of the danger and physical elimination." Some problems, according to Youssef Qahwaji, are common not only to the Libyan, Tunisian and even North African settings but also throughout the Arab world. *"Levels of youth participation in local communities are low in every Arab country,"* He said. *"Associations may be numerous but they are not as active as they should be. Obtaining permission and funding to work on youth projects is routinely beset by administrative difficulties."*

According to Riadh Abidi, national coordinator of the Association Tunisienne d'Action Culturelle, however *"Everything is easier in Tunisia. We have decrees, laws and stable authorities organizing the dialogue and the work of the associations. Libya has next to nothing."* Youssef Qahwaji was emphatic: *"Libyan civil society's lack of procedures and*

Making proposals

The last day involved the Libyan group only. They were divided in three sub groups where the young activists had the floor to address the urgent issues of their country.



economic oversight has allowed for many irregularities, such as the financing of militia groups via non-governmental organizations.”

A contrasting situation can be seen in the area of the media, too. In Tunisia, after the switch to social networks that came with the revolution, a degree of trust has been restored in the renewed traditional media. In Libya, by contrast, the social media, notwithstanding their limitations and conjecturing, remain a key communication tool for civil society activists. The return to the renewed traditional media has yet to happen. But how can one act, write and enter into dialogue at gunpoint? In a country where there are 20 million firearms for a population of 6 million, the number one priority, according to Sami Hourani, is disarmament. *“I do not know whether it is possible to disarm, but nothing is possible without it.”*

Fostering dialogue between mutually unaware or opposing bodies, settling tensions and suggesting solutions to enable Libya to emerge from the crisis, those were the challenges set for the fourth day of the forum, which was reserved for the Libyans. *“I was very keen to meet young people from all of Libya’s political parties and to have a chance to speak with them and discover their ways of thinking”* said Fathia of Attawasul. Long-awaited by all, yet dreaded by some for fear of open conflict, the fourth day turned out to be highly productive. *“We are from the same country but have many ways of thinking,”* noted Nur of CIL. *“We differ politically and all have parties that we support, but we can still sit down together, it is not out of the question; we can talk without fighting. That is what I appreciate the most; because if we can do it how come our elders cannot?”* added Nada of Young Writers of Benghazi.



“Nobody is happy about what is happening in Libya at the moment. We all want the same thing: a stable, forward-moving, country.”

Nada



Several groups were formed, each consisting of young activists from all of Libya’s political parties, and tasked to consider the issues, to seek solutions, set priorities, and to formulate and present them. Three main proposals were developed:

- Introduce global economic and social strategies, taking into account the traumas related to the war, and create economic opportunities to facilitate demilitarization;
- Establish, under the auspices of the international authorities, a committee of young people to travel from town to town and meet local leaders to promote peace;
- Promote youth participation in the drafting of the constitution.



From the one thousand and one ideas discharged from the forum, other proposals emerged. The next phase – sorting and implementation – has begun. Informal networks have been formed, interlinking Libyans from around the country and Tunisians. The organizing international authorities are pooling their means, which is essential, as Michael Croft reminds us, because the *“work remaining to be done is significant”*. Studies are being carried out and meetings arranged. Joint activities will soon see the light of day.

Attending this forum may have given the Tunisians a chance to discover their neighbours and attest to the progress made since the revolution, but to the young Libyan activists it appeared to have been a milestone. *“I was hoping to learn something,”* concludes Nur, *“and learn something I did. It could help to change the situation, some of it at least. Coming here has made me see what sort of goals I should work towards, what the real problem is, and how other Libyans are thinking.”* ■

In their own words

Campaigning in the teeth of war

Everything changed for Nada and Nur after Tawfik Bensaoud was murdered.

This kind of forum helps non-governmental organizations and the United Nations to take into account the real needs of youth. But it is our job to extend our networks and to continue working to offer them projects on specific themes.



I empathize and sympathize with the Libyan people. I was curious to see how they were doing and to understand them better. The media are saying differing things; the truth is always subjective. I wanted to meet them for myself and to offer them succour through ideas.

This is a time of meeting others and looking for areas in which to work together. Views and recommendations are very useful, but at the next forum we will need to move on to genuine action.



To me, this forum is very important as it enables the sharing of expertise with the Libyans and Tunisians. All of this will provide input for my work in the civil society field. I hope that I can carry on and enhance these exchanges in the future.

Before the forum I did not believe it possible to enter into dialogue with former militiamen. After meeting some of them here, however, I have come to understand their point of view and am leaving with a wealth of ideas and pointers for solutions that I will start to work on as soon as I am back in Benghazi.



Young people are struggling to cope with the pressure of arms use, unemployment and traditions. They are exploited by their elders. Having a state is more important than prioritizing one's town or tribe because it imposes common rules applicable to all groups, irrespective of their differences.



Nada – After Tawfik was murdered, we realized that they could have killed us. They were not going to say to themselves “No, this one is young” or “They are women”. No, they can kill anyone.

Nur – They have no limits. We have been through a painful and damaging emotional state. We lost a friend, sure, but we also realized that those working in the civil society sector; those developing that part of the country, are considered dangerous. We are not involved in politics or engaged in supporting the government. We have not insulted anyone and yet we were threatened all the same. We realized then that the country was in a difficult and truly dangerous situation, which so many Libyans did not realize. Because those staying in the safety of their homes, eating and watching television, and not really interested in civil society or politics or anything but money and work, do not realize this.

Nada – Everyone knew Tawfik. After he died, I read everything he had written and wondered: why did they target him? Okay, so he expressed his personal views on Facebook, but we have all done that. We all have one side that we support and another we detest; everybody does, not least civil society activists. Tawfik was not into anything particularly political. He did not belong to a party. He might have organized demonstrations but he did so within the framework of civil society. It is not as if he had any influence on the combatants or anything like that. Why, oh why did they kill him, I wondered. I was really confused, in shock, on top of which everyone was thinking: we must stop writing and drawing attention to ourselves. I did not even know what exactly it was that I should stop doing. Giving my personal opinion? Working in civil society? Wanting to live in harmony with others? Should I just go to work, earn money and nothing else, no longer engage in anything at all?

Nur – Yes, it is as if everything seemed certain and normal whereas in actual fact it was not. But nobody explained any of that, nobody said: “watch out, that is dangerous”. We cannot understand how those groups think. When I left Benghazi, there was nobody out of doors, no lights, the streets were deserted, the shops shut: “This is not the Benghazi I know; this is not the street I walk down every morning.” It was truly awful. When I went back last week, however, the roads were busy, there were people outside, the shops were open and private individuals were even organizing activities for the very young to make up for the lack of school. I realized that there is hope. We are optimistic.

Nada – Yes. The police station is close to my uncle's house and I saw a message exclaiming: “the police are there”. Someone wrote to me saying: “I am so happy I have just been fined.”

Nur – We are going to keep on working in civil society. What do we have to lose? Only ourselves, which is all right.

Nada – I keep thinking that Tawfik, in our shoes, would never give up. He would never say: “I must stop.” He would say: “I must keep working.”

Nur – We are doing it for him.

Nada – Yes, we are doing it for him and for Libya. Because he really wanted a better Libya. He was one of the most motivated of any of us, so we owe him that.

Nur – We owe it to all of them, everyone who was killed.