

# Can the Youth Bulge Pose a Challenge for Turkey? A Comparative Analysis Based on MENA Region-Driven Factors

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## Abstract

One common characteristic of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries that have experienced internal conflicts in recent decades is their large youth cohorts, known as the youth bulge. As Turkey also has a youthful population, it raises the question of whether this will represent a threat rather than an opportunity for the society. This study investigates this question by identifying the major factors that can transform a youth bulge into a threat and analyses them comparatively for the specific case of Turkish youth. A novel set of factors is proposed that can be also used by further studies. The discussion related to these factors is organized under four major situations, namely (a) economic situation, (b) educational situation, (c) political situation and (d) cultural situation. The study concludes that while Turkey differs from most of the MENA region countries in terms of these structural factors, it tends to lag behind the average international standards, which leave young people in Turkey in a limbo between becoming an opportunity for the future of society or a challenge.

## Keywords

Youth, youth bulge, Turkey, conflict, participation, MENA

## Introduction

One of the most prominent challenges for countries with large youth cohorts relates to managing this group as a positive societal asset. Large youth groups in a society can either become part of peace building, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. However, in some cases, they can become a threat and participate in conflicts.

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In recent decades, a remarkable number of societies have witnessed the negative outcomes of a youth bulge, as their young population has become an element of domestic conflict, political tension and uprisings rather than a positive contribution. In the literature, these disproportionately youthful populations are mostly discussed within the framework of the 'youth bulge', which has been defined as 'extraordinary large youth cohorts relative to the adult population' (Urdal, 2004), and 'an extensive young population relatively to the working age population' (Cincotta, 2009, p. 10). Since the 2000s particularly, it has been used as an analytical tool for explaining the root causes of increasing violence, conflict and extremism in many Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region countries. This concept is therefore also relevant for Turkey, where a youthful population is one of the key demographic characteristics, with more than half of its population younger than 30 years old. Turkey's demographic structure has also significant ethnic-, linguistic-, religious-, individual- and gender-based diversities, while its regional, economic, social and educational disparities, along with political tensions further complicate this picture.

However as a quantitative parameter, the number of young people is not in itself enough to explain whether a country will directly experience the side effects of a youth bulge; so it is also worthwhile to analyse why this only becomes a challenge in some countries. In particular, this tends to happen when a youth bulge develops alongside various other structural factors. Critical analysis of these factors that make large youth groups a problem rather than an opportunity has thus become increasingly important for societies.

Currently, both a theoretical approach and appropriate analytical tools are still lacking in the academic literature for investigating the youth bulge. As explained earlier, the concept does not directly imply negative outcomes but is instead the result of a transformation process due to specific factors. If this transformation does not occur automatically given a threshold youth population, which factors turn this youth bulge into a security concern for societies? Answering this question is crucial, not only to identify major factors determining the youth bulge process but also to discuss the case of Turkish youth on a firm theoretical foundation guided by specific parameters, which is the primary aim of this study.

This study investigates this question for Turkey in two main research steps. First, based on the experience of MENA region countries, it identifies the major factors turning the youth bulge into a threat and categorizes them under four 'situations'. Second, it applies these factors comparatively to the specific case of Turkey. Finally, it reaches some conclusions as to whether Turkish youth may become a bulge with negative outcomes for the society as has happened in several MENA countries since 2011.

## **Debating Youth Bulge as a Threat**

People between the ages of 15 and 24 currently constitute almost one-sixth of the global population (Bloom, 2012, p. 7). However, youth means more for contemporary societies than just the size of a demographic group since a young population can play a prominent, active role in all spheres of social, economic and political life. The large youth population conceptualized as the youth bulge has transformed into a

challenge for several countries as a number of studies have revealed the connection between this concept and conflicts in many countries. These include Prisca, Kandagor, and Kiprono's (2012) study on youth and conflicts in Kenya, Urdal's (2004) comparative study of countries with youthful populations that experienced conflicts, McEvoy-Levy's (2001) research on youth as social and political agents in post-settlement peace-building processes, Fernando and Peiris's (2011) work on the youth of Sri Lanka and conflicts, La Graffe's (2012) study regarding the youth bulge and conflicts in Egypt and Weber's (2013) analysis of the impact of youth on democratic stability. Other studies have investigated uprisings and conflicts in specific regions, such as the Arab Spring and its linkage with youth (Rad, 2012; Roudi, 2011). These researchers and also international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations have discussed the critical question of how young populations should be managed within the context of existing and potential conflicts. The common characteristic of these studies is their negative references to the youth bulge concept, which considers that large youth cohorts can become a threat rather than opportunity due to their involvement in conflicts within their societies.

The youth bulge first became noticeable following Huntington's popular book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). Huntington asserted that the significant young populations of Muslim countries could influence conflicts due to their size and social mobilization (Huntington, 1996, p. 117). Based on this thesis, Huntington discussed the remarkable consequences of this youth bulge in Muslim countries, claiming that large youth cohorts could become leading actors in social movements, reform and even revolutions (Huntington, 1996, p. 117). He supported this argument by referring to the role of large youth cohorts in the eighteenth-century democratic revolutions in Western countries and the 1920s' fascist and other extremist movements, asserting that large youth populations are more likely to be recruited into conflicts and social movements if they have been socially and economically excluded. In concluding that youth in Muslim countries are a fundamental factor underlying the conflicts experienced by these countries, the youth bulge constituted one of the key elements in his 'clash of civilizations' thesis (Huntington, 1996, p. 119).

Huntington's arguments have been widely discussed and his claims about the impact of youth bulges have stimulated further studies. Henrik Urdal's report on 'The Devil in the Demographics: The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict, 1950–2000' is noteworthy, especially in offering a wider perspective to explain the internal conflicts of the Arab Spring (Urdal, 2004). Against Huntington, he argued that the youth bulge does not directly increase the threat of conflicts. Rather, he showed through correlations between internal conflicts and youth bulges that youth bulges tend to cause conflicts and transform youth into a threat only if these countries also have economic problems and/or unstable political regimes, as in examples from sub-Saharan Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (Urdal, 2004, p. 2). Urdal interestingly claimed that even the rise of Nazism in Germany was a combination of a youth bulge with poor economic conditions. His study was particularly prescient since various uprisings and internal conflicts exploded less than a decade later, in which young populations played influential roles. In many cases, they were also abused by different ideological and political groups within each internal conflict.

Yet since these initial discussions, the youth bulge has rarely been discussed in the academic literature and there are still no suitable analytical tools based on a sound theoretical approach. To find answers to the primary research questions of this study related to Turkish youth, and to provide a novel contribution to these debates, this study proposes a set of factors regarding four situations that may convert a youth bulge to a threat for societies: economic, educational, political and cultural.

## **Methodology and Analytical Framework**

As emphasized before, this study mainly investigates whether there is a threat that Turkish youth may become a youth bulge with negative outcomes for the society. The first step in this study was identifying the major factors that transformed the youth bulge into a threat in MENA region countries. The second step was to apply these factors comparatively to the specific case of Turkey. For these two separate but complementary tasks, different data resources and methodologies were used.

For the first step, relevant published academic articles and reports from the limited literature on the youth bulge in the MENA region were browsed for a systematic literature review. Three selection criteria were adopted: (a) the sources were published between 2000 and 2017; (b) they included youth bulge in their English language titles; and (c) they were listed in Thomson Reuters's Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and/or Elsevier's Scopus and/or Google Scholars' databases. A total of 76 articles and reports were identified from this search. After scanning and analysing them, 15 were identified as specifically related to the MENA region. A qualitative textual approach based on thematic content analysis was employed to analyse them, focusing on two major questions for revealing the factors. First, which factors about youth do these studies refer to while discussing the youth bulge as a negative concept? Second, which factors do they use, directly or indirectly, to link the youth bulge with conflicts and uprisings in MENA? Applying the major steps of content analysis to these identified studies in relation to these two questions, the emerging patterns were coded and collated as factors. A thematic map was created by clustering the revealed factors to each other and by checking whether the factors cohered meaningfully. Finally, the findings were categorized under a set of four specific situations (economic, educational, political and cultural) and their factors, which can be used by further studies.

The first and most frequently mentioned factors are related to economic situation, including lack of (decent) employment opportunities and high youth unemployment (Ahmed, 2014; Barakat & Urdal, 2009; Cabras, 2010; Evoh, 2012; Füller, 2003; Hendrixon, 2003; Inayatullah, 2016; Jagietto & Van Der Heijden, 2011; Ortiz & Cummin, 2012; Roudi, 2011; Schomaker, 2013; Weber, 2013), poor economic structure, such as a stagnant economy or limited state resources (Ahmed, 2014; Barakat & Urdal, 2009; Farzanegan & Witthuhn, 2017; Hendrixon, 2003; Jagietto & Van Der Heijden, 2011); low annual GDP growth (Urdal, 2004; Weber, 2013), falling wages, gender inequality in labour force participation (Ahmed, 2014), school to work transition challenges and jobs-skills mismatches (Cabras, 2010).

The last two factors of economic situation were also closely linked to educational situation, which includes the second set of factors. These factors were low educational enrolment, particularly in secondary and higher education (Barakat & Urdal,

2009; Chabaan, 2009a; Evoh, 2012), low literacy rates (Ahmed, 2014), few educational opportunities (Evoh, 2012; Hendrixon, 2003) and gender imbalance in school enrolment (Ahmed, 2014).

The third set of factors was clustered under political situation, with factors of political instability (Cabras, 2010), non-democratic regimes or lack of democracy (Austin, 2011; Urdal, 2004; Yair & Miodownik, 2016), poor youth access to democratic processes or low political participation (Cincotta, 2009; Inayatullah, 2016; Jagietto & Van Der Heijden, 2011; Schomaker, 2013; Yair & Miodownik, 2016).

The final group of factors was related to cultural situation, with relevant studies mostly addressing problems related with race and gender (Austin, 2011), religion (Austin, 2011), ethno-linguistic fractionalization (Ahmed, 2014), lack of dialogue and the level of diversity in society (Hendrixon, 2003).

To address the second comparative research task, eight major MENA countries were selected: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. All have a significant youth population and are also the primary countries that experienced recent conflicts and uprisings during the Arab Spring after 2011. Considering statistical information about MENA region countries, data from 2010 provides a clear picture of these countries before conflicts erupted in 2011. Data was collected for the major indicators of the factors, which were identified during the first research step. However, some of the factors that revealed during this step (and included in Table 1) were very broad, immeasurable or only descriptive such as 'stagnant economy', 'weak democratic culture' or 'a poor state constrained in responding to the demands and needs of its citizens'. Therefore, the possible major components of these relatively more abstract factors were identified by controlling how and in which context the analysed studies addressed these factors and what sort of indicators they used and/or referred to while associating these factors to the youth bulge. Eventually, a set of 'measurable' indicators, which could be representative for the relevant factors and situations, was identified and the data related to these indicators were collected. The availability of the data for the same indicators for all selected countries was also considered to provide synchronization in comparative discussions. Consequently, these indicators included and limited to youth population, youth unemployment, youth labour participation, GDP per capita, women labour market participation, school enrolment, female schooling rates, age requirements for running for political office, and levels of democracy, freedom and diversity, which could be representative for discussing the relevant factors and situations.

The data was sourced from reports and data sets from the World Bank, the United Nation's report on youth in the MENA region, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) statistics, International Labour Organization (ILO) statistics, Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) statistics and studies from the related literature. Regarding political and cultural factors, data were drawn from the Freedom House (FH) and Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, and reports of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).

The remainder of this article provides comparative insights into Turkey's young population based on this methodology. It discusses the possible role of these factors in transforming youth cohorts into a youth bulge with negative outcomes based on MENA region examples and comparatively evaluates Turkey's situation, which has one of the youngest populations in the Western world.

**Table 1.** Review of the Factors That Transform MENA Region's Youth Bulge into a Threat

Author (s)	Factors for Youth Bulge in MENA Region			
	Factors Related to Political Situation	Factors Related to Educational Situation	Factors Related to Economic Situation	Factors Related to Cultural Situation
Ahmed (2014)		Literacy rates, gender equality in educational enrolment	Economic growth rates, gender equality in labour force participation, unemployment	Number of ethnic groups
Austin (2011)	Weak democratic culture			Religion, gender inequality
Barakat and Urdal (2009)		Educational attainment levels	The structure of the economy, unemployment	
Cabras (2010)	Political instability		Jobs and skills mismatch, lack of employment opportunities	
Cincotta (2009)	Restricted access of youth to democratic institutions and processes			
Evoh (2012)		Out of school rates, education systems' failure to address the needs of youth	Unemployment	
Farzanegan and Witthuhn (2017)			Stagnant economy	
Hendrixon (2003)		Limited educational opportunities	Resource scarcities, limited employment opportunities	Diversity in terms of race and religion
Hoffman and Jamal (2012)			Inadequate employment	
Inayatullah (2016)	Youths' unfair share of political power		Unemployment, the changing structure of job market	

Jagietto and Van Der Heijden (2011)	Lack of opportunities for political participation	Low economic growth, unemployment
Ortiz and Cummins (2012)	Low level of political participation and weak democratic structures, the lack of opportunities for democratic participation	Increasing demand for new jobs, limited employment opportunities
Schomaker (2013)	Regime type	High level of unemployment rates or decreasing wages
Urdal (2004)	A poor state constrained in responding to the demands and needs of its citizens, type of political regimes	Insufficient annual GDP growth and GNP per capita growth

**Source:** Compiled by the author based on the literature analysis.

## **What Can Youth Bulge Factors of MENA Region Imply for Turkey?**

The MENA region is distinctive because its large youth population has been a key player in recent violence and armed conflicts since 2011. In 2010, on the eve of the Arab Spring, MENA's total youth population was around 90 million, meaning that most of its countries have very youthful populations. For instance, the median age in countries such as Syria and Jordan was 21 years in 2010, whereas the world average is 29 years (Roudi, 2011). Although MENA countries are at different stages, the region has experienced an overall demographic transition in the decline of fertility rates and infant mortality so the region's population is expected to reach around 690 million by 2050. The youth cohort, representing those under the age of 24, is larger than all other age groups in the region (Cabras, 2010, p. 3) with one in five people between the ages of 15 and 24 (Roudi, 2011, p. 1). Chabaan asserts that the current youth bulge in MENA countries is closely connected with the aforementioned demographic evolution of a decline in infant mortality but sustained fertility rates and the resulting redistribution of age structures in these countries since the 1950s (Chabaan, 2009b, p. 39).

Turkey is located at the intersection of the Middle East and Europe, which diverge in terms of the number and qualifications of their young populations. Regarding its youth population, Turkey matches the overall picture in the MENA region rather than Europe. The proportion of Turkey's population aged between 15 and 24 constitutes 16.3 per cent of the total population (TUIK, 2017), which is higher than the average for the EU28 countries at 11.5 per cent.<sup>1</sup> If we extend the definition of a young society to include children and all adults under 30, then almost half of Turkey's population is young. This young population is predicted to peak by 2020 (Lam, 2006, p. 49).

As already mentioned, however, it is unjustified to assert that large youth cohorts directly pose a threat of conflict just by their size since other factors are necessary to transform a youth population into a risk for a society. As discussed by several studies outlined earlier, a comparison of Turkey to MENA countries can be based on the four distinct but interrelated situations and their relevant factors identified in the first part of this study. The following section discusses each in more detail in relation to Turkey.

### ***Economic Situation***

Bringing the young population into the labour market is a major concern of a country's policymakers while developing youth policies. A large young population makes this process more complex since the country must generate enough jobs to absorb these youth groups. If this is not done then it increases the risks of excluding and losing an entire generation of a particularly vulnerable group, which Ortiz and Cummins (2012, p. 6) describe as the 'double whammy' of an excess supply of young people and limited jobs for youth. Employment, education and social inclusion are linked elements in promoting a peaceful society. It is expected that education can increase employability, which raises the sense of dignity and belonging in young people as they gain decent, well-qualified jobs. This directly reduces their

tendency to become involved in activities against social cohesion. Unfortunately, however, employment opportunities for young people have not kept pace with their increasing numbers. As the UN has emphasized, it is much harder to guarantee that young people will get a decent job than it was in 1995, noting that almost 600 million new jobs are needed for currently unemployed young people (United Nations, 2016, p. 12).

According to the ILO, the world's highest youth unemployment rates are currently 28.2 per cent in the Middle East and 30.5 per cent in North Africa (ILO, 2015, p. 6), while these rates have remained 10 per cent higher than the global average of 13 per cent for decades (ESCWA, 2013, p. 6). Several studies have therefore drawn the connection between youth unemployment and the Arab Spring by noting increasing youth unemployment rates in MENA countries. Hoffman and Jamal (2012), for example, argue that there is a very clear causal relationship in the countries that experienced the Arab Spring between the uprisings and conflicts in the region and high unemployment in these countries' large youth cohorts. In parallel, when unemployment rates for 2010 are analysed for those MENA countries that were most deeply affected by the Arab Spring conflicts, the data indicates that almost all were suffering from high youth unemployment rates with percentages from 25 to 42 (Table 2). MENA's youth unemployment is closely related to democratic pressures resulting from high population growth after the 1950s due to declining infant mortality combined with increasing fertility (Ahmed, 2012). More importantly, as an ILO report indicates (ILO, 2015, p. 7), while education levels have increased, job opportunities for young populations in Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East, and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa have decreased. The statistics are also unpromising regarding youth labour participation rates, which are only 31.3 per cent in the Middle East and 33.7 per cent in North Africa, compared to a global average of 47.3 per cent. Finally, the gender gap in youth unemployment rates is exceptionally large and worsening in MENA, at 13.8 per cent and 19.7 per cent, respectively (ILO, 2015, p. 9).

Another significant factor related to economic situation is that MENA region GDP per capita is relatively low. In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Jordan, it was even under 5,000 US dollars in 2010 (see Table 2). GDP per capita is an important parameter determining living standards and life satisfaction of young people in these countries. However, income inequality complicates this picture, even in MENA countries with higher GDP. For instance, the uprisings and revolution in Egypt are believed to be strongly linked with income inequality (World Bank, 2015, p. 13). Furthermore, the OECD also notes that growth rates in these countries between 2000 and 2010 were unable to create sufficient new jobs (OECD, 2016, p. 23).

Regarding gender equality in the labour market, the MENA region lags behind world averages with lower rates of women labour market participation. This both excludes women and wastes an important human resource for the regions' development since women constitute almost 49 per cent of the region's population (World Bank, 2004, p. 2). Gender-based employment problems can be also discussed in terms of cultural factors since cultural biases against young women also prevent further integration of women into the region's labour market (Roudi, 2011, p. 9). As the OECD points out, young women in MENA region countries have to cope with both gender-based and youth based challenges (OECD, 2016, p. 11).

Finally, skill gaps and mismatches are an additional element that decreases youth employment in MENA region countries and hinders young people's transition from

**Table 2. MENA Region and Turkey**

	Youth Unemployment Rate (2010)	GDP per Capita (2010) US Dollar	Total Population under 25	Youth as % of Working Age Population (2010)	Median Age	Female Labour Force % Total (2010)
Tunisia	29.5	4,140	39	27	29	26.7
Egypt	25.2	2,602	38.8	31	24	23.1
Libya	42.9	12,120	47.2	27	26	26.9
Yemen	30.4	1,309	61.1	42	17	25.7
Syria	19.1	2,806	55.2	35	21	15.4
Bahrain	5.1	20,722	36.9	19	30	20.2
Saudi Arabia	29.4	19,259	45.41	27	26	14.6
Jordan	30.0	3,679	55.16	37	21	17.8
<b>Turkey (2017)</b>	<b>19.9</b>	<b>10,434</b>	<b>42.6</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>

Source: Prepared by Author based on the data from the World Bank—<https://data.worldbank.org>

school to work. Skill gaps and mismatches are both qualitative because young graduates' qualifications do not meet the needs of companies and also quantitative from a lack of 'educated-trained' people in specific professions, mostly due to emigration (Aring, 2012, p. 5). To cope with the challenges of skill mismatches, active labour market programmes (ALMPs) have been implemented in MENA countries such as Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt and Syria. However, despite the ambitious aims of these programmes, they have had little effect on unemployment (Angel-Urdinola, Senglali, & Broadman, 2010, p. 3).

Considering Turkey in terms of these economic factors in MENA, Turkey is a unique case with certain specific advantages. Turkey's GDP per capita is higher than many MENA region countries, while its youth unemployment rate was 19.9 per cent in 2017, which is lower than both the MENA and EU averages. However, women's employment rate, at 31 per cent of the total labour force, is still less than half of men's in Turkey (TUIK, 2017) and less than half the EU's average (TUIK, 2017). The skill deficit and skill gap, which is higher than the global average, also hinders the integration of young people into Turkey's labour market (David, 2015). In addition, a fifth of young people live outside Turkey's social security system, which prevents their active participation in social life and is an alarming indicator for a society with such a large youth population (Gür, Dalmış, & Kırmızıdağ, 2012, p. 116). As a fragile group, they are vulnerable in any economic crisis and, according to TUIK statistics; Turkey's youth has experienced the largest growth in unemployment (Güney, 2013, p. 14). Unemployment and exclusion from the social security system may prevent them achieving their goals and drive them to despair.

### *Educational Situation*

Analysis of existing studies related with the youth bulge in MENA reveals that factors related to educational situation are also crucial since they have also an impact on turning young populations into a threat. Barakat and Urdal's study (2009) is worth mentioning specifically since they discussed education as a special parameter of the youth bulge by measuring cohort-specific educational attainment rates. They concluded that large undereducated male youth cohorts could increase the risk of conflict (Barakat & Urdal, 2009, p. 25). Furthermore, they argued that insufficient spending on education might produce grievances among those segments of the population that are subsequently excluded from education (Barakat & Urdal, 2009, p. 6).

Disparities in education and the lack of equal opportunities are a direct challenge for young people in MENA. Key factors highlighted by the related literature reviewed here are the low level of educational enrolment—particularly in secondary and higher education—low literacy rates, fewer opportunities, less government spending and resources for education, and gender imbalance in school enrolment. As well as much lower school enrolment rates in MENA countries than OECD countries, secondary and tertiary education enrolment rates are also falling in some MENA countries (OECD, 2016, p. 25). Although MENA's school enrolment rates have increased for primary education since 2000 (from 86% to 94%), secondary school enrolment remains around 70 per cent, which is still relatively low (Hoel, 2014). Early school leaving has been one of the challenges at secondary

level particularly, with MENA countries such as Tunisia, Algeria and Syria experiencing high rates of school dropouts (UNICEF, 2014, p. 4). MENA's average literacy rates were 78 per cent in 2010 while children's exclusion from education being cited as one of the biggest problems for the region's youth (UNICEF, 2014, p. 1). The proportion of children who are not enrolled in pre-primary or primary education has remained over 40 per cent for many years in some MENA countries, such as Yemen, Egypt and Syria (UNICEF, 2014). Finally, total public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP is also low. For instance, it was around 2.50 per cent in Bahrain, 3.70 per cent in Egypt and 2.20 per cent in Libya during the 2010s (UNESCO UIS, 2017).

Compared with MENA, Turkey's educational standards are much higher despite failing to reach international standards in many aspects of educational policy, such as gender equality, participation levels, equality in education, access to pre-school education, and balancing demand and supply in higher education (ERG, 2009). For example, 65 per cent of young females fail to complete secondary school in Turkey, which is almost double the rate for males (EFA, 2012, p. 280). This gender imbalance in education is increasing, especially in rural areas. The rate of young women who are literate but have not completed school is 8.9 per cent (TUIK, 2013, p. 24). Beyond these disparities and the lack of equal opportunities, another deficiency in the Turkish education system is the insufficient integration of intercultural understanding and tolerance in curricula, materials and the system—as will be discussed under cultural factors (ECRI, 2011). Alongside family and social life, education can provide a fundamental channel for youth to embrace intercultural understanding. However, several components of the Turkish education system are still considered below international standards regarding intercultural understanding and diversity (Arslan, 2009).

### *Political Situation*

The literature on the youth bulge commonly identifies political instability, non-democratic regimes or low levels of democracy, low youth access to democratic processes and low political participation as prominent political factors that make

**Table 3.** Minimum Age for Running for a Political Office (2016)

	Selected Countries	Minimum Age for Running for a Political Office
<b>Turkey</b>	Turkey	25
	Saudi Arabia	30
	Syria	25
	Tunisia	23
<b>Selected MENA Countries</b>	Egypt	25
	Libya	21
	Yemen	25
	Syria	25
	Bahrain	20

**Source:** Compiled by the author based on national statistics and data.

youth bulge a negative experience. This can be also discussed in terms of its relationship to liberal democracy in that a country's transition to democracy or democratic consolidation can be destabilized by a youth bulge. That is, a combination of a large youth population and unemployment makes democracy fragile and creates an environment that encourages authoritarian regimes to develop, such as in Ecuador, Sri Lanka and Peru (Cincotta, 2009, p. 11). Within this framework, the young population is regarded as both an opportunity and a threat since it can be either an agent of conflict prevention and peace building or violence and conflict. Cincotta (2009), for example, claims that the youth bulge poses a challenge for attaining a stable democracy (p. 10), arguing that democratic maturity or the stability of the democratic system and young peoples' access to democratic structures are crucial factors to preserve stability.

The OECD also highlights that the lack of inclusive institutions that enable MENA youth to participate and the dominance of older people in these mechanisms discourage young people from political participation (OECD, 2016, p. 9). Consequently, the participation of youth in formal political institutions is low and it is hard to create opportunities for youth engagement. The most important effect of these deficiencies is that young people are losing their belief in political institutions as a formal method of political participation, which increases the threat of marginalizing youth in MENA countries (OECD, 2016, p. 25).

The minimum age for voting or running for a political office is an important factor in political participation, together with participation in non-governmental organizations and political parties. Both direct participation, the structural integration of young people in decision-making mechanisms, and indirect participation, such as campaigning or opinion building, are aspects of youth political participation. Unsurprisingly, several countries that experienced conflict after 2010, such as Libya, Yemen and Syria, have higher age requirements for running for a political office (see Table 3). Excluding youth from formal means of political participation can create frustration, which may then be reflected in their involvement in more violent political movements. For example, young people were one of the most significant groups in political demonstrations and protests in MENA countries, taking an active role to demand reform in Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon. Inadequate government responses to their demands for education, jobs and further engagement risk transforming these frustrations into violence and extremist movements (Mercy Corps, 2015).

Meanwhile, data on Turkish youth demonstrates that their political participation is lower than their European peers. Only around 10 per cent of young people in Turkey have been a member of a political party (Kılıç, 2009, p. 46; Konda, 2014, p. 43), while 76.5 per cent are either not a member of a political party or not thinking about becoming a member (Konda, 2014, p. 43). More importantly, 43 per cent think that working in a political party will not solve any problems (Kılıç, 2009, p. 51). Around 75 per cent have never joined a non-governmental organization, such as charities, foundations or student communities. Nevertheless, Turkey's minimum age for running for a political office has been 25 years old until 2017, which is also higher than several European countries.

Considering the level of democracy and freedom as a factor, the 2016 FH ratings placed MENA lowest globally, with most countries categorized as 'not free'. According to FH's 100-point rating scale, Libya was 13, Egypt 26 and Saudi Arabia

10. In 2010, just before the Arab Spring, the region was graded as ‘5 per cent free’, while the Middle East dropped from ‘partially free’ to ‘not free’ (Freedom House, 2010). Regarding democracy, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index has long given MENA countries very low ratings in its 10-point index based on 60 factors. In 2010, Bahrain’s rating was 3.49, Tunisia’s 2.79, Egypt’s 3.07, Jordan’s 3.74, Libya’s 1.94, Saudi Arabia’s 1.84 and Yemen’s 2.64 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017).

FH’s 2010 democracy and freedom rating for Turkey was ‘partly free’, and it remained in this category in 2017. Its freedom rating was 4.5 out of 7 and its overall freedom score was 38 out of 100, which is worrying in terms of political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2017). The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index’s rating for Turkey was only 5.04 in 2016, which although higher than those of MENA countries is unsatisfactory when compared with European levels (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017).

### *Cultural Situation*

Culture is defined in the UNESCO Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies (1982) as ‘the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group including not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs’ (Kutukdjian & Corbet, 2009, p. 4). Examples from MENA confirm the role of cultural factors since conflicts based on culture and ethnicity has been central for many years. The role of factors related to cultural situation in the transformation of youth into a bulge and for triggering young people’s involvement in cultural conflicts are also an essential component of Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis as explained earlier. However, culture is one of the most difficult factors to measure regarding its role in the youth bulge and associated conflicts. Although less frequently discussed in the literature, cultural factors are mostly considered in relation to problems of race, religion, ethno-linguistic fractionalization and lack of dialogue in spite of diversity in society. Intercultural dialogue, which includes a package of values such as tolerance, democracy, equality and human rights, can be also considered with these factors since it can help depoliticize conflict issues and promote social understanding (Coulby, 2011, p. 102).

Young people can play a crucial role in developing such an understanding because they are the most influential and open group in society, and generally have the best opportunity to gather on platforms that accommodate diverse ideas and approaches (such as educational institutions, non-governmental organizations or friends’ groups). Thus, they are a unique group that should be addressed to develop inter-diversity dialogue and approaches to help prevent conflicts. However, the development of intercultural understanding requires a multi-agency network, including not only formal education but also families and work places. That is, schools and the education system are not the only agencies of intercultural understanding because family and non-governmental agencies should play prominent roles. It is a set of values and competences that includes cultural inclusiveness, tolerance, valuing diversity and creativity, social justice, equity and human rights as its underpinning principles (Leo, 2010, p. 14). The Council of Europe (COE)

recommends that intercultural competences should be developed in education by integrating their teaching into formal programmes and by extending them into non-formal settings, increasing the mobility of young people and developing further initiatives with civil society for developing intercultural competences for young people (COE, 2011, p. 61). Similarly, UNESCO emphasizes that the development of intercultural competencies cannot be limited just to classrooms (Kutukdjian & Corbet, 2009, p. 17). Rather intercultural understanding diffuses across different areas of life, such as social, political, linguistic, historical, intellectual, moral and power relations (Leo, 2010, p. 10).

Despite the challenges of measuring cultural diversity, Fearon's index of ethnic and cultural diversity by country usefully indicates the level of diversity in both MENA region countries and Turkey (Fearon, 2003). MENA countries were categorized as 'considerably diverse' with most being fragmented by mostly two or more ethnic or ethno-religious groups (Fearon, 2003, p. 208). Turkey displays all the characteristics of a multicultural society since it includes several ethno-cultural groups within its population, including non-Muslim minorities of Armenians, Jews and Greeks, and Muslim minorities and immigrants, such as Arabs, Alevis, Kurds, and Balkan and Caucasian immigrants (Kaya & Harmanyeri, 2010, p. 8). Moreover, these categories can be further subdivided into 20 ethnicities and roughly 130 sub-groups, highlighting the diversity of Turkish society (Kaya & Harmanyeri, 2010, p. 8). Finally in Turkey, there are many examples of other identity dimensions, such as Alevi-Sunni, women-men, religious-secular, and white collar-blue collar, which can have cross-identical sentiments and unite in certain contexts. Turkey's young people are a key group in reflecting all these cross-identical sentiments and living within the structure of all these identities.

According to a recent research on identities and othering in Turkish youth, the perceptions of young Turkish people about facing discrimination in different spheres of life have reaches almost epidemic levels and they define discrimination as one of the unjust treatments that they most frequently meet during the 'othering' process in their lives (Uyan Semerci, Erdoğan, & Sandal Önal, 2017). The levels of social distance and discrimination among different groups of Turkish youth (which are defined in terms of culture, religion and political attitude) are extremely high (Uyan Semerci et al., 2017, p. 242). For instance, 83.5 per cent of the young respondents are against to work or to do business together with a person from the groups that they define as 'other', while 80.4 per cent of these young people do not want to be a neighbour with the members of these groups (Uyan Semerci et al., 2017, p. 245).

Finally, education can be assessed together with cultural factors since the education system is one of the social spheres that can contribute to improving the intercultural understanding of Turkish youth. However, structural problems arising from old-fashioned curricula are still major issues. The ECRI emphasizes the importance of courses about citizenship and human rights in primary school curricula, and about democracy and human rights in high school curricula to improve intercultural understanding among Turkey's young generation (ECRI, 2011, p. 46). It recommends that the authorities integrate intercultural understanding, non-discrimination and mutual respect into school curricula via teaching materials like course textbooks, and increase awareness about how Turkish society is multicultural (ECRI, 2011, p. 46).

## Conclusions

Despite its increasing importance within academic debates concerning the role of youth in recent conflicts in the MENA region, it could be a mistake to analyse the youth bulge as automatically transforming youth into a challenge for their societies. This study stemmed from this assumption while discussing the large youth cohorts in Turkey after proposing an analytical framework based on a review of the limited literature about the youth bulge in the MENA region. It was revealed that the factors that trigger negative impacts of the youth bulge can be framed under four major situations, namely (a) economic situation, (b) educational situation, (c) political situation and (d) cultural situation, with associated factors also discussed and compared. Although there is still no study comparatively analysing the differences of these factors in terms of their influence to turn large youth cohorts into a threat—such as being a part of conflicts, social uprisings or marginalization—the studies which were investigated for this research mostly emphasize the impact of the economic situation and its factors. A ‘knock-on effect’ is very relevant to explain the prominent role of the economic factors and the interplay between a weak economy, less educational opportunities and more youth unemployment, which means also the development of a youth bulge with negative connotations and results. In line with this idea, systematic analysis of the related studies showed that cultural factors are more rarely addressed when compared with the others. Rather than underestimating its impact, it is worth noting that this may relate to difficulties in measuring cultural factors and their possible effects. Nevertheless, it was still possible to identify ethnic diversity and religion as indicators of cultural factors that are partially addressed by some studies.

The situations and relevant factors analysed in this study indicate that Turkey is unique regarding the possible outcomes of its youth bulge. On the one hand, it cannot be directly equated with MENA countries due to having several particular characteristics. First, Turkey has a longer history of democracy since the 1920s and a strong and established culture of secularism. Moreover, it has long aspired towards Western civilization, which it confirmed by becoming an official candidate for EU membership, after joining the COE and NATO. Thus, it has a more established and institutionalized democracy than MENA region countries. The inclusion of its young population in higher education has increased constantly while Turkish youth is highly engaged in international education opportunities, particularly those provided by the EU. Turkey’s literacy rates are far higher than MENA’s, while its private sector is far better at providing employment opportunities for young people.

On the other hand, while Turkey differs from most MENA region countries in terms of these structural factors, it tends to lag behind average international standards, which can be considered a true benchmark for the factors discussed in this study. Overall, data on unemployment, participation and education of Turkish youth show that multidimensional youth policies, which cover the factors in this study, are not fully developed. In addition, Turkey’s relatively poor performance in education, political participation and employment compared to its peers in Europe demonstrates that young people in Turkey remain in limbo between becoming an opportunity for the future of society or becoming a challenge that could increase the risk of social conflict and tension. Regional disparities in terms of the economic

and educational opportunities provided for young population in Turkey further complicate these problems and increase the risks related with youth in some segments of Turkish society or some regions of the country. This risk makes it essential for Turkey to improve the supportive components of youth policies, particularly regarding employment, political participation and education through a comprehensive and inclusive approach.

Another critical conclusion from this study is that youth should be regarded as the central group in Turkish society when designing any kind of initiative to promote cultural diversity and social cohesion. As a country with almost half of its population below 30 years old, developing well-qualified and educated youth can be considered as an essential key to promote domestic peace and social cohesion. Moreover, to prevent transformation of youth bulge into a threat for Turkey, it becomes increasingly necessary to equip its young population with more than a standard, formal education: inculcating other critical values are essential, particularly tolerance, participation, human rights awareness, respect for differences and intercultural understanding. Appropriate platforms and social environments for young people in Turkey, such as schools, social environments and family, are vital to increase further the interaction of diverse young groups rather than separating them according to identity, group or belonging, such as gender, religion or lifestyle.

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1. The United Nations and European Commission provide different definitions of youth. While the United Nations defines a young population as 15–24 years old, the European Commission embraces a wider definition between 15 and 29 years old. In this study, this difference was taken into consideration in interpreting and compiling the data and statistics on youth.

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