

# The Global Securitization of Youth

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## Abstract

This article looks critically at the new global youth, peace and security agenda, that has been marked by the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 in December 2015. It argues that this agenda needs to be situated within the broader context of the securitization of development, and that the increasing interest in youth as a security subject and actor is shaped by three overlapping sets of global security concerns: the concept of the youth bulge is a euphemism for the problem of growing surplus populations worldwide; the ideal of youth as peacebuilders is a model for eliciting youth support for the current global social and economic order; and the spectre of globally networked youth being radicalised by extremist groups has legitimated joint state and private sector projects that are taking an increasingly active role intervening in the online lives of young people around the world. The article draws on an analysis of a collection of core documents that form the heart of the global youth and security agenda; and it argues for the need for greater critical reflexivity in considering the growing attention being paid to youth as a social category in global development and policy discourse.

## Keywords

counter-extremism; peacebuilding; securitization; surplus population; youth; youth bulge

## Note on Contributors

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# The Global Securitization of Youth

## Introduction

‘The role of youth lies at the heart of international peace and security,’ former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has claimed, ‘We have to encourage young people to take up the causes of peace, diversity and mutual respect.’<sup>1</sup> Ban’s comments were made in April 2015 at a United Nations Security Council session on the role of youth in countering violent extremism. In December 2015, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, the first time the Security Council had directly addressed the central role of youth in global security concerns.<sup>2</sup> Resolution 2250 was part of a set of international policies and conferences developed recently on youth and security, including: the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in February 2015; the European Youth Against Violent Extremism conference in June 2015; the Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security in August 2015; the Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism in September 2015; and the *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, focusing exclusively on the role of youth in the Arab region. All of these are closely networked and mutually referential. From these meetings and documents, a future set of action programmes, research agendas and funding streams are promised, that target global youth as central subjects and actors for international peace and security.

In some respects, none of this activity is particularly new. From its origins, youth as a social category has been linked with security concerns. With the rise of industrial capitalism, the ‘youth problem’ emerged in nineteenth century Europe and North America in the context of elite concerns with managing the threat to social order seen to be posed by ‘idle’ and unsupervised young people in growing industrial cities.<sup>3</sup> Ever since, there have been

recurrent moral panics over the social threat of youths, teenagers and adolescents in cities and nations across the globe.<sup>4</sup> Youth have been subject to security controls through youth curfews, criminalization of youth activity, surveillance of youth in public spaces, use of high tech security measures and police presence in schools and so forth. However, the recent proliferation of international activity on youth and security also represents an important shift. Supporters of this new agenda claim this shift involves a new positive embrace of youth. Resolution 2250 is said to be a ‘milestone,’ ‘breakthrough,’ ‘paradigm shift’ and ‘historic Resolution’ for recognizing ‘the positive role’ that ‘young men and women play for building sustainable peace,’ rather than viewing youth primarily as security victims or threats.<sup>5</sup> But such arguments do not hold up to scrutiny, as recent documents on global youth and security are saturated with concerns with youth as threat and liability. Youth has always had a double-sided aspect, such that for every stereotypical representation of youth as problem and pathology there exists an inverse idealisation of youth as possibility and panacea. ‘Youth as a sign of contradiction, as the figuration of a mythic bipolarity,’ note Jean and John Comaroff, ‘is enshrined in the foundations of the modern collective imaginary’.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, we argue that the shift that has occurred in the current period is the transition of youth from being primarily a local and national to a global security concern. Though there have been precedents – in the 1960s, for example, the US Central Intelligence Agency raised the alarm over the global spread of a rebellious university student movement – this is largely a new development.<sup>7</sup> It has occurred through a double movement that has accelerated from the 1990s onward: on the one hand, the social category of youth has become an increasing concern for international development policy and discourse, in part due to its utility for the neoliberal project of renegotiating and eroding welfare and development state entitlements;<sup>8</sup> and on the other, development policy and discourse has

become ever more closely tied to global security concerns, following the end of the Cold War and rise of the 'war on terror'.<sup>9</sup> In this context, global youth has become an important frame for articulating and acting on elite anxieties about three overlapping sets of security concerns. First, the concept of a 'youth bulge' has been used as a politically acceptable euphemism for talking about the problem of expanding surplus populations in the post-welfare and development state era. Second, the ideal of 'youth as peacebuilders' has joined other ideal roles of youth (as active citizens, change agents and entrepreneurs) as ideological models for interpellating young people into supporting the contemporary global economic order.<sup>10</sup> Third, a moral panic over the spectre of 'globally networked youth' being radicalized and recruited by terrorists has legitimated the spread of close partnerships between the state and private sector not just to monitor and control social media and internet technology, but to recruit youth to help create and disseminate online messages of peace, security and defence of the global status quo.

In the following pages, we develop our argument based on an analysis of a set of core documents that comprise the heart of the global youth, peace and security agenda. We identified this set of documents by following intertextual references in Resolution 2250 and its supporting documentation to preceding events and texts identified as central to the development of the global youth and security agenda; and searching online for subsequent events and texts that directly position themselves as taking up Resolution 2250's agenda. We further draw in this article on a review of academic literature on securitization, counter-extremism, peacebuilding and critical youth studies.

## **The securitization of development**

The global securitization of youth has occurred in the context of the securitization of development and rise of a 'security-development nexus'. Development, like youth, has been linked to security agendas from its origins.<sup>11</sup> However, scholars argue that there have been a series of shifts in the relationship between the two concepts and fields of practice since the 1990s, that involves the increasing prominence of security rhetorics, actors and institutions within national and international development programs. The concept of securitization is defined as 'the process of presenting an issue in security terms, in other words as an existential threat';<sup>12</sup> while the idea of a security-development nexus refers to a political environment in which security concerns and development challenges are claimed to be 'inextricably linked' and an extensive 'network of connections' is constructed to join up security and development policies, practices, actors and institutions.<sup>13</sup> The effectiveness of prioritising security concerns throughout all arenas of social life, or linking up development and security agendas, is not necessarily based on research evidence; and the safety and well-being of individuals and communities may not actually be improved by the ubiquitous promotion of security concerns. Rather, security in the current period has taken on a value in itself, such that its invocation 'sets up a framework where any external regulatory or interventionist initiative can be talked up ... as being of vital importance'.<sup>14</sup>

As security agendas have been extended across fields of social practice, the concept of security has been broadened to an all encompassing notion of 'human security' – defined by the United Nations as a concern with political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural 'threats and situations' that block 'human freedoms and human fulfillment,' including 'chronic and persistent poverty, ... climate change, health pandemics, ... and sudden economic and financial downturns'.<sup>15</sup> In such a context, the concept of security can

be applied to any social issue; it also means there has been increasing interest, in the name of security, in the perpetual monitoring, managing and training of individuals and populations. This is reinforced by a third trend: security has been globalised, in the sense that the security of states and populations in the global North are said to be threatened by development and security failures in the rest of the world, and dependent on 'security and development policy interventions in regions previously lacking geostrategic importance'.<sup>16</sup> Underdevelopment in peripheral regions of the global economy is thus reconstrued not just as a development problem for those living in these regions, but a security concern for those living in metropolitan centres of global wealth accumulation. This logic is what leads the US State Department to invest in local youth engagement and leadership programs throughout Africa and the Middle East, in the name of supporting national security interests of averting terrorist attacks on Americans at home and overseas.<sup>17</sup>

### **Youth bulges and surplus populations**

The most important way in which global youth have become linked to global security concerns is through the concept of the youth bulge: the idea that there is in many countries of the global South a disproportionate and unprecedented number of young people, and this demographic imbalance can lead to escalated conflict, violence and political unrest if not addressed effectively. Most of the youth, peace and security documents refer to the concept of the youth bulge. Resolution 2250 begins by noting that 'today's generation of youth is the largest the world has ever known,' and 'young people often form the majority of the populations in countries affected by armed conflict'.<sup>18</sup> The *Declaration on Youth, Peace and Security* opens by claiming that the largest generation of youth in history makes it a 'demographic imperative' to include youth in global security agendas.<sup>19</sup> The *Arab Human*

*Development Report 2016* explains its focus on youth by pointing to the ‘unprecedented’ demographic ‘wave,’ ‘mass’ and ‘momentum’ in the Arab world caused by the fact that ‘young people between the ages of fifteen and 29 make up nearly a third of the region’s population, [while] another third are below the age of fifteen’.<sup>20</sup>

While youth bulge theory has existed for decades, it took off in the 1990s, promoted by individuals working with the US security establishment to explain ‘political instability in the Arab world and ... recruitment to international terrorist networks’;<sup>21</sup> invoked not only to explain the rise of violent Islamic fundamentalism, the theory has also been used to account for the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings and overthrow of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East region in 2011.<sup>22</sup> More broadly, the US National Intelligence Council has warned of a demographic ‘arc of instability’ of ‘countries with youthful age structures and rapidly growing populations [that] form a crescent stretching from the Andean region of Latin America across Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus, and then through the northern parts of South Asia’.<sup>23</sup> Given this recent history of youth bulge theory, it is thus not incidental that there has been a strong Middle East basis for the development of the recent global youth and security agenda: Resolution 2250 was introduced by Jordan during its membership of the UN Security Council in 2015; the Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security in August 2015 that worked to build support for the passage of Resolution 2250 was held in Amman under the patronage of Crown Prince Hussein; and the first of a global series of regional consultations to promote the progress of Resolution 2250 was also held in Amman and focused on the ‘Arab States Region’.<sup>24</sup> As with other states in the Middle East (and their western backers), the government of Jordan has been particularly concerned with security threats posed by the youth bulge. ‘In recent years, we came to a challenge unlike any before’, King Abdullah II has written: ‘Jordan entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a large youth

population, young men and women who have the same high expectations as their peers across the world'.<sup>25</sup>

Youth bulge discourse is the direct successor to claims in previous eras that framed the problem of 'overpopulation' in the global South as a threat to US national security, and population control in these regions as an essential development priority for protecting US security interests. The difference is that, in the context of the Cold War, US foreign policy leaders worried that growing populations in low income countries would create economic and political instability and foster the spread of communism rather than, as is the case today, Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.<sup>26</sup> Youth bulge theory has been criticised for drawing on stereotypical and unfounded claims about youth, and particularly, male youth of colour in the global South.<sup>27</sup> Early versions of the theory made strongly deterministic arguments, by claiming that there are threshold tipping points in society, so that when the proportion of the population aged 15-24 is higher than 20%, civil unrest and political violence will ensue.<sup>28</sup> Youth, and young men especially, are said by youth bulge theorists to be more inclined to violence and conflict than other age groups, since they are allegedly 'highly idealistic, sensitive to peer approval, prone to risk taking, and naively accepting of ideological explanations'.<sup>29</sup> Not only are such claims widely challenged in the youth studies literature,<sup>30</sup> but also, despite youth bulge theory being used to explain outbreaks of political violence in regions like Africa, 'most African nations with youth bulge populations have not experienced recent civil conflicts, and in those that have had conflicts, most male youth never get involved with the violence'.<sup>31</sup>

While such criticisms are important, youth bulge theory today is not specifically about youth in and of itself. First, there is variation in how the youth bulge is defined: Resolution 2250 is notable for its 'old' definition of youth, as it excludes all individuals under



the age of 18 and defines youth as 'persons of the age of 18-29 years old'.<sup>32</sup> Youth bulge theorists in general not only use a range of ages for defining youth (15-24, 15-29, 17-26 etc.), but typically consider this group in relation to the adult working population, not the population as a whole.<sup>33</sup> The 'youth bulge' thus is often used as shorthand to refer to youthful, expanding populations more generally, and can include everyone under the age of 30, including infants and young children – as can be seen in the *Arab Human Development Report 2016's* concern, noted above, with a youthful demographic 'momentum' in the contemporary Arab world. In media, policy and academic discussions, there is frequently a slippage between the idea of a youth bulge and a youthful age structure in a country's population.<sup>34</sup> Second, the significance of the youth bulge today is typically spoken of in relation to the problem of lack of economic opportunity. In the *Declaration on Youth, Peace and Security*, it is not large populations of youth that lead to unrest and violence, but the failure to provide youth with social and economic opportunity:

Around the world we, young people, are disproportionately affected by limited access to social and economic opportunities. Limited or inadequate employment opportunities ... can contribute to economic isolation, political disillusionment and social unrest.<sup>35</sup>

It is in the context of economic stagnation and decline, most youth bulge theorists now argue, that youth bulges (or youthful age structures) can lead to social unrest and political conflict, not necessarily due to innate characteristics of the young, but to competition over limited resources and opportunities.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in other contexts, large youthful populations 'may even be a boon to the economy' and 'can actually enhance economic growth, if the youth can be absorbed into new jobs'.<sup>37</sup>

What the youth bulge concept is effectively talking about, then, is the problem of surplus populations in the current post-welfare and development state period. One of the

core features of global neoliberal capitalism is the growth in numbers of people who are 'rendered as structurally unnecessary to a capital-intensive economy,' who 'cease being of value as workers and consumers,' and are 'expelled from the core social and economic orders of our time'.<sup>38</sup> This has been variously discussed by scholars as 'human waste'<sup>39</sup>, 'advanced marginality',<sup>40</sup> 'wageless life'<sup>41</sup> and 'expulsions'.<sup>42</sup> This shift in capitalist society toward the growing production of surplus populations is often explained as a product of technological displacement of labour from capitalist production, shift of capital into sectors with limited labour requirements, globalisation of capitalism leading to the displacement and dispossession of people who previously enjoyed alternative livelihoods, and neoliberal rollback of the development and welfare state model of seeking full if unequal social and economic inclusion.<sup>43</sup>

The concept of the youth bulge provides elites with a politically legitimate way of talking about the problem of surplus populations, for it shifts attention from contradictions internal to global capitalist society to apparently external challenges that are created by the combination of high fertility rates, poor governance and limited development in countries of the global South. Indeed, the social category of youth worldwide, Sommers suggests, is increasingly identified as an 'outcast majority' and defined as 'a young person with a tenuous social status and a hoped-for social transformation into adulthood ... [w]hich may not happen.'<sup>44</sup> In the global South, especially, youth is described by many researchers as a period of 'waithood,' as many young people are 'blocked from realizing ... models of successful adulthood [and] are forced to subsist in a prolonged state of dependency, boredom, frustration, unemployment and underemployment'.<sup>45</sup> Once we recognise the youth bulge can be used as a frame for articulating concerns about surplus populations, it is easier to understand one of the paradoxes of contemporary global youth development

policy: despite the ostensible concern with youth exclusion and unemployment, there is little evidence of any shift away from the neoliberal development model that has been linked to producing such exclusion and unemployment, nor of any new mass employment programs that might be expected to effectively address these problems.<sup>46</sup> The aim of the post-welfare, post-development security state is not ‘the incorporation of all social classes into the State,’ but ‘the management of social fragmentation and the ‘advanced marginality’ of a growing global surplus population rendered ‘structurally irrelevant’ to capital accumulation’.<sup>47</sup> The concern, in other words, is what to do about ‘massive surpluses of potentially restive redundant populations’ that global elites fear pose a genuine security threat to ‘continued capital accumulation and social cohesion,’ locally and nationally, and at the global level as well.<sup>48</sup>

### **Youth, counter-extremism and peacebuilding**

The overriding concern in the global youth, peace and security agenda is that youth, and particularly surplus populations of youth excluded from economic opportunity, are at risk of being radicalised and pulled into violent (and other) forms of extremism. Resolution 2250 warns that ‘the rise of radicalization to violence and violent extremism, especially among youth, threatens stability and development’.<sup>49</sup> The *Youth Action Agenda to Prevent Violent Extremism* claims that ‘the appeal of violent extremism is growing around the world,’ and ‘a sense of disengagement and marginalization, despite the inter-connected world we live in, leaves young people vulnerable to recruitment wherever they are’.<sup>50</sup> The *Arab Human Development Report 2016* argues that ‘violent radicalization has become a particular concern – indeed, a defining feature – across the Arab region, particularly among youth’.<sup>51</sup> The Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security in Amman, though recognising

that ‘the vast majority of young people have nothing at all to do with violence,’ argues that ‘nonetheless, global patterns and growing incidence of violence, extremism and instability challenge the world community’ to respond effectively to ‘demographic ... imperatives to offer meaningful avenues for young people to shape the future of their countries’.<sup>52</sup> The immediate trigger for this concern, as Williams observes, is ‘a background of ever-younger recruits to the ... Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ... and other groups in conflict zones and more stable countries further afield’.<sup>53</sup>

The principal response to the threat of youth radicalization and extremism in these reports and conferences is to seek to engage youth directly as ‘peacebuilders’ themselves, doing counter-extremism and anti-radicalization work at the local, national and global level. In this, the youth, peace and security agenda fits with trends in the broader securitization of development: for it argues that traditional state responses to youth radicalization often tackle only ‘the symptoms of the problem rather than addressing the factors driving participation in violent extremism,’ and can ‘further aggravate tensions and trigger more support for violent ideologies;’ there is thus a need for a more expansive and participatory approach that engages youth ‘as key allies in building resilience against violent extremism’.<sup>54</sup> There is now an expanding set of ‘guiding principles,’ ‘pillars of action,’ ‘action agendas,’ ‘key action points’ and implementation ‘steps’ for fostering youth peacebuilding around the world.<sup>55</sup> The purpose of all of these is to get youth to embrace a ‘culture of peace, tolerance [and] dialogue’ and vision of a ‘peaceful global society,’ and to reinforce the endlessly repeated mantra that ‘there is no development without peace, and there is no peace without development’.<sup>56</sup>

All of this can sound appealing, and is a reason why the youth, peace and security agenda is celebrated by supporters as a turning point that fosters a positive view of youth in

global society. It is likely this agenda can open up space for valuable youth peacebuilding work. Nevertheless, it is vital to take a critical look at what exactly is being said and done in the name of this new 'youth as peacebuilder' discourse. Three points, in particular, stand out. First, the youth, peace and security agenda adopts an essentialist view of peace as self-evidently and unproblematically desirable, with violence and conflict unquestionably bad and undesirable. Statements about seeking the commitment of global youth to a 'culture of peace' are made without qualification. The problem with this approach is that it:

disregards that some conflicts may be necessary such as ... when social groups are struggling for equality and social justice.... [W]hat constitutes 'conflict' or 'peace' as well as their evaluative imprint poses critical questions concerning who decides which conflict may be productive and which is destructive and with what criteria....[S]ome groups in conflict-affected societies might strongly believe that before 'justice' exists, they cannot consider peace.<sup>57</sup>

While demands for a youthful commitment to peace may be found throughout the key global youth, peace and security documents, it is notable that there is limited attention paid to the question of social justice. There is no discussion of how the significance of peace and conflict may be contested in local contexts; nor is there an attempt to 'distinguish between productive and destructive forms of conflict'.<sup>58</sup> The *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, for example, fails to clearly differentiate between the conflicts of the Arab Spring uprisings that challenged authoritarian regimes across the Arab region in 2011, and the conflicts of the elite-led counter-revolution that ensued. Instead, the report blurs these together, holds youth responsible, and calls for interventions to prevent such outbreaks of conflict happening again:

[Y]oung populations are more prone to engage in conflict than older ones.... For this reason, this Report examines the problems and challenges of youth in light of the recent [Arab Spring]

uprisings.... Since 2011, several countries in the region witnessed uprisings, and the region has experienced the most rapid expansion in war and violent conflict among all global regions over the past decade.... The exclusion of youth is pervasive throughout the Arab region ... [and] ignited uprisings across many Arab countries in late 2010 and early 2011, causing some to descend into social and political instability and deep economic uncertainty.<sup>59</sup>

In this light, the call made by the *Arab Human Development Report 2016* for 'education [that] will help youth appreciate the value of peace' and 'reorientation programmes that instill the value of peaceful coexistence' in youth can be seen as problematic.<sup>60</sup> For this call is based on claims that hold Arab youth more responsible than other groups for violent conflict in the region; it fails to address the regional and global structural violence, inequality and injustice that make commitments to peace impossible in current contexts; and it actively seeks to suppress or redirect the challenges to the political and economic status quo that erupted so impressively in the Arab Spring.

Second, the practice of youth 'peacebuilding' that is called for throughout the global youth, peace and security is left vaguely defined: for, as with the concept of human security, peacebuilding encompasses all arenas of social practice. The United Nations' *Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding* states that peacebuilding should involve 'all sectors (social, economic, cultural and political) and levels (family, school, community, local, regional and national governance)'.<sup>61</sup> Despite the lack of clear definition, the model of peacebuilding promoted by the youth, peace and security agenda has all the hallmarks of the liberal peacebuilding approach associated with the United Nations, World Bank and international development organizations since the 1990s, an approach that claims that 'the surest foundation for peace ... is market democracy,' and that sees peacebuilding as a matter of 'transplanting Western models of social, political and economic organization

into war-shattered states' and pursuing 'political and economic liberalization'.<sup>62</sup> Resolution 2250 'stresses the importance of creating policies for youth that ... positively contribute to peacebuilding efforts', in particular 'social and economic development' that 'provide youth employment opportunities' and promote 'youth entrepreneurship'.<sup>63</sup> The *Declaration on Youth, Peace and Security* likewise calls on governments to 'prioritize youth employment opportunities and inclusive labour policies', teach youth 'skills to meet the labour demands', and work with the private sector 'as partners in youth employment and entrepreneurship programs'.<sup>64</sup> While these might sound like promising ways to address youth economic marginalisation and exclusion, the call by international organizations in the current period to open up employment opportunities for the young has overwhelmingly been tied to a standard set of neoliberal demands for privatization, market deregulation and rollback of workplace protections for older workers – reforms that actually tend to harm not help the economic standing of youth and other workers alike.<sup>65</sup> This link is made clear in the *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, which blames youth development problems in the Arab world on the large size of the public sector and calls for a shift to more private sector employment, as well as removal of the 'tight restrictions' and protections that inhibit free 'movement of goods, people and capital' in the region.<sup>66</sup> Promotion of youth employment has now become one of donors' preferred peacebuilding programs in many post-conflict settings; but not only is there limited evidence that such programs do much to create sustainable and good quality jobs for young people, it is also possible that they work to entrench social and economic models that undermine peace and security in the first place.<sup>67</sup>

The call to become a young peacebuilder can appear noble and utopian. As Gur Ze'ev notes, there is a widespread 'conviction that peace should be sought, longed for, or struggled for'.<sup>68</sup> But as Pugh insists, we always need to ask 'who is peacebuilding for, and

what purposes does it serve?'.<sup>69</sup> What many now argue is that the liberal peacebuilding model that has prevailed for the past decades does not push for the radical redistribution of political and economic power that could effectively address the marginalisation of youthful surplus populations: it instead deploys the uplifting rhetoric of peace and peacebuilding to build and maintain ideological support for a neoliberal global order that remains massively unequal, and protects and serves the interests of national and global elites in the first instance.<sup>70</sup> When young people are asked to become 'peacebuilders,' we need to consider carefully the exact nature of the peace they are being asked to help build, and whether this 'peace' supports or contests 'the fortification of the existing order and the preservation of the invisibility of hegemonic violence'.<sup>71</sup>

The third key issue that needs to be addressed in the global youth as peacebuilders discourse is the link between peacebuilding and the call for interventions to prevent the spread of youth radicalization and extremism. As with peace and peacebuilding, these terms are vaguely defined: Resolution 2250 contains fourteen mentions of these two terms in five pages of text but fails to provide a definition for either; the *Youth Action Agenda to Prevent Violent Extremism and Promote Peace* has a whopping twenty eight mentions of the word 'extremism' in four pages of text but again does not define its meaning, except to say its appeal is 'growing' and the 'gravity' of its threat is severe.<sup>72</sup> When governments and international organizations do define these terms, they tend to do so in sweeping ways that refer to any individual or group that seeks to mount a serious and direct challenge to their own agendas, whether through violent or other means.<sup>73</sup> The *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, for example, defines radicalization as:



a process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideas or aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo or prevailing ideas, expressions, or institutions ... [that] can be violent or nonviolent'.<sup>74</sup>

Radicalization and violent extremism, moreover, are terms that only apply to opponents of western states and international organizations: US drone strikes that kill civilians around the world, or IMF structural adjustment programs that severely undermine public well-being can never be examples of violent extremism, while the terrorist attacks that might respond to such actions and programmes inevitably are.

The youth, peace and security agenda draws directly on the field of theory, policy and practice on anti-radicalization and counter-extremism that has been constructed over the past two decades in the context of the global war on terror. As such, it is subject to the same critiques that have been made of this field more generally.<sup>75</sup> Rather than acknowledge the legitimacy of the grievances that may underlie terrorist acts of violence, anti-radicalisation and counter-extremism theory assume that such acts are rooted in the psychology, ideology and identity of extremist individuals and groups. Consequently, the response is typically to increase surveillance and intervention in the lives of those youth deemed 'at risk' of extremism, in order to identify and counter the ideas, dispositions, relationships, ideologies and cultures believed responsible for triggering terrorist violence. The favored solution is to put youth through preventative or restorative educational programmes in which they can be taught to value and embrace the 'prevailing ideas, expressions, or institutions' of their home societies. The *Youth Action Agenda to Prevent Violent Extremism* thus calls for the production, sharing and amplification of 'new narratives', 'new stories about peace and positive role models', and 'a future without violence'.<sup>76</sup> The *Arab Human Development Report 2016* calls on religious leaders,

governments, civil society groups, educators, artists and media producers to collaborate in order to 'build and communicate a message of moderation' that provide a 'counter narrative' to the 'insidious ideologies that underpin violent extremism'.<sup>77</sup> Almost inevitably, anti-radicalisation and counter-extremism work has led to the stereotyping and targeting of ethnic and faith based (particularly Muslim) communities, as well as individuals with views and practices that are strongly critical of the mainstream political, economic and social order. In the domains of formal and nonformal education, anti-radicalisation and counter-extremism policies and programmes have been criticised for their repressive impact on the freedom of thought and expression, and contravention of basic tenets of a healthy public, democratic and critical model of teaching and learning. Rather than teach students, for example, to 'train their critical and analytic lens on the states and societies that shape their lives,' something that might be said to be "the best safeguard against dogmatism and acceptance of authoritarianism' that democratic education can be expected to provide,' instead 'the anti-radicalization movement asks educators to work hand in glove with the state security apparatus to train their analytical lens on students themselves'.<sup>78</sup>

### **Globally networked youth**

The global youth, peace and security agenda has further been motivated by the rise of a moral panic over terrorist groups using the internet and social media to radicalise and recruit young people worldwide.<sup>79</sup> The internet, US President Obama warned, 'erases the distance between countries' and enables extremists to enter into the bedrooms of youth to 'poison their minds'.<sup>80</sup> Resolution 2250 expresses 'concern over the increased use ... by terrorists and their supporters of new information and communication technologies, in particular the Internet, for purposes of recruitment and incitement of youth to commit

terrorist acts'.<sup>81</sup> The Global Youth Issues Special Advisor for the US State Department warns of 'the Islamic State's knack for glamorizing terrorist life through social media', such as 'tweeting photos of 'a stack of fluffy pancakes with syrup dripping down' to draw in young men'.<sup>82</sup> The UN Special Envoy on Youth notes that 'there are almost 50,000 Twitter accounts with ISIS affiliates – almost 90,000 tweets every day being sent by ISIS supporters,' and insists 'we have to win the battle online and offline by engaging young people'.<sup>83</sup>

Initial responses to global fears of online youth radicalization focused on increased social media and internet monitoring and censorship. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other internet companies have shut down sites and accounts suspected of extremist links: Twitter alone had reportedly closed over 235,000 accounts 'linked to ISIS and other extremist organizations' by August 2016.<sup>84</sup> However, such acts of disruption have been seen as ineffective and inefficient (not to mention at risk of violation of free speech rights), and global security actors have subsequently moved toward directly involving youth in producing counter-messages and alternative narratives online, as a new form of youth peacebuilding work.<sup>85</sup> Counter-narratives entail 'efforts to deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging, whether through ideology, logic, fact or humour;' while alternative narratives seek to 'unite the silent majority against extremism by emphasising solidarity, common causes and shared values'.<sup>86</sup> The Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism launched the One95 counter-narrative program, described as 'an online networking, education and funding hub' that 'connects global youth working to combat extremism in their respective communities'.<sup>87</sup> The Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security created a 'youth4peace' website, storify page and Twitter hashtag, as well as the 'I Declare' campaign, 'in which youth posted on social media phrases beginning with 'I Declare', followed by an issue relevant to youth, peace and security.<sup>88</sup> These are part of a

growing multitude of online youth counter-extremism programs. The US State Department runs a Peer 2 Peer: Challenging Extremism public-private partnership that sponsors university students globally to ‘use their creativity, digital proficiency and expertise on their community peers to identify how best to motivate and encourage youth to become involved in countering extremism’.<sup>89</sup> The UK-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue runs worldwide Youth Innovation Labs, that ‘connect youth activists with local artists, creatives and tech-sector experts’, in order to ‘facilitate the creation of counter-narrative campaigns and initiatives that challenge or provide alternatives to the ideologies, narratives and propaganda of violent extremists’.<sup>90</sup> The principle of all of these programs is that young people themselves ‘are in the best position to reach and educate their peers about the impact of violent extremism’.<sup>91</sup>

As is the case with all moral panics, supporting evidence for claims both of the threat of online radicalization and effectiveness of online counter-extremism efforts is limited. Not only is the concept of radicalization problematic, there is little to suggest it happens online only on any regular basis – despite fearmongering rhetoric about ‘isolated individuals tied to their computers in an echo chamber for which reality and other influences are often kept at bay’.<sup>92</sup> The literature on online radicalization is plagued with problematic stereotypes of youth vulnerability and passivity that misrecognise how young people engage actively with communication technology.<sup>93</sup> Not only are online counter-extremism efforts of questionable effectiveness, they also pose a number of concerning developments.<sup>94</sup> For the challenge of launching effective online counter-extremism programs has led governments to work in close coordination with the private sector to better manipulate both young people and information on the internet and social media. Counter-extremism groups working with the US Department of Homeland Security have thus sought guidance from marketing companies

‘that have devoted considerable resources to understanding youth, their changing interests, behaviors, preferences, and needs’, including ‘the management and marketers of an internationally-renowned teen music group that has achieved its multi-billion dollar popularity almost solely through the Internet’.<sup>95</sup> Google, Microsoft, Facebook and Twitter have all worked with governments on online counter-extremism programs that recruit youth to act as ‘credible messengers’ for delivering the messages the state has decided it wants delivered.<sup>96</sup> Google has also set up a ‘diversion’ program, so that when an internet ‘user searches for certain terms or topics, their requests are diverted to nongovernmental organization ... sites where countermessaging occurs’.<sup>97</sup> Ironically, despite arguments by counter extremism experts for the need to promote critical digital or media and information literacy among youth in order for them to better analyse the information they encounter on the internet and social media, much current online counter extremism work seems to seek to deliberately obscure, manipulate, mislead and control the nature and sources of information online.

## **Conclusion**

Invocations of youth as world changers – or peacebuilders in this case – can be deeply appealing; for young people who find themselves so often shut out of opportunities to lead or even participate, elite invitations to take a direct role in global security matters can seem like a major step forward. But if we are to understand the larger and longer term significance of the current global youth, peace and security agenda, we need to take a close and critical look at each of the core terms this agenda promotes. Who exactly are the youth the agenda is talking about, and why are global youth becoming the focus of elite attention now? What is the nature of the peace and security that youth are being asked to embrace

and promote, and what exactly is expected to be done in the name of youth peacebuilding worldwide? We need to ask what are the practical consequences of this agenda in terms of changes in education, employment, welfare and justice laws, policies and programs that directly impact the lives of young people and their families globally. We need to question, too, what are the roles and interests of the multinational corporations and international organisations that are playing a direct and growing role in shaping security discourses and practices surrounding young people in their online and offline lives?

The central argument that we put forward here is that to understand and, most importantly, to be able to develop alternatives to the current global youth, peace and security agenda, we need to focus on what is left unsaid and unaddressed in this agenda. We need to consider the phenomenon of expanding surplus populations worldwide, and the contradictions of global neoliberal capitalism that have led these populations to grow. Rather than seek to include youth within and secure youth commitment to current social and economic institutions, we need to address and work to radically transform the fundamental injustices and inequalities of these institutions. Alongside seeking to more closely observe and guide the ideas and actions of marginalised young people around the world, we need also to turn our critical, analytic gaze to monitor and contest the ideas and actions of current political and economic elites. Former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, in a recent Security Council debate on the role of global youth in countering violent extremism, issued a ‘call for deploying ‘weapons of mass instruction’ to foster a culture of peace’ among youth globally, and insisted that ‘this is more than a clever slogan – it is an effective strategy’.<sup>98</sup> There is a distinct risk that, in the absence of careful and sustained critique of the global youth, peace and security agenda that Ban and others have

been promoting, the violence and attack invoked in this 'effective strategy' is going to end up being directed at global youth themselves.

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## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> Katz, *Improving Poor People*.

<sup>4</sup> Griffin, *Representations of Youth*.

<sup>5</sup> Envoy on Youth, "UN Security Council"; Youth Policy, "UN Security Council".

<sup>6</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, "Reflections on Youth", 280.

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<sup>11</sup> Hettne, "Development and Security".

<sup>12</sup> Buzan and Hansen, *Evolution*, 214.

<sup>13</sup> Stern and Öjendal, "Mapping", 11.

<sup>14</sup> Chandler, "Security-Development Nexus", 368.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations, *Human Security*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Pugh, Gabay and Williams, "Securitization of Development", 195.

<sup>17</sup> US Department of State and USAID, *Joint Strategy*.

<sup>18</sup> Security Council, *Resolution 2250*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Global Forum, *Declaration on Youth*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report*, 5, 7, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Urdal, "Clash of Generations", 608.

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- <sup>32</sup> Security Council, *Resolution 2250*, 1.
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- <sup>46</sup> Huber "Foreign Policy Challenge"; Author, *Title*.
- <sup>47</sup> Hallsworth and Lea, "Reconstructing Leviathan", 142.
- <sup>48</sup> Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions*, 108; Shaw, "Drone Warfare", 20.
- <sup>49</sup> Security Council, *Resolution 2250*, 2.
- <sup>50</sup> Global Youth Summit, *Youth Action Agenda*.
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- <sup>79</sup> Bott et al., *Terrorist Tool*.
- <sup>80</sup> Byford, "Internet Erases the Distance".
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- <sup>82</sup> Ahmed, "Resolution 2250".
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