



A BAX report of the

YOUNG ARAB VOICES VISIT TO LONDON October 2015



Young Arab Voices is a debating skills programme organized by the British Council with the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) across the Middle East and North Africa. British-Arab Exchanges (BAX) joined with the British Council and ALF to host Young Arab Voices delegates from Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Algeria during their visit to London.



SUMMARY

Young Arab voices from five Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries spoke out courageously in London in October 2015, helping break negative stereotypes and open up important new conversations between their region and the UK.

The eight visitors to London were students and young professionals who have been participating in the British Council's Young Arab Voices (YAV) programme, developing their debating skills. British-Arab Exchanges (BAX) worked in partnership with the British Council and the Anna Lindh Foundation to host a week of encounters and interaction with people in Britain. The week included public debates and media appearances, as well as behind-the-scenes meetings with university students, parliamentarians, asylum seekers, journalists and researchers.

The visitors came from Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, and included postgraduate students, teachers, an accountant, charity and social work volunteers. They all had an interest in impacting civil society positively, building friendship, and meeting their counterparts in the UK to discuss the critical issues they face collectively.

OBJECTIVES

The formal objectives of the week were to:

- Engage with the UK debating community to share best practices
- Engage with the UK educational and research community interested in discussing the MENA region's issues (including education, human rights, reforms, terrorism) from a youth perspective
- Engage with UK politicians and think-tank leaders on current key geopolitical issues
- Engage with young people and society in Britain, to promote mutual learning and understanding



THE WEEK'S ACTIVITIES

Highlights of the week's packed programme included:

- An **informal welcome session**, giving the visitors the opportunity to meet with their British hosts and gain an understanding of the week's activities ahead. The welcome party included four alumni of BAX programmes programmes, including one Gazan, currently studying in London, two Britons who have taken part in a past BAX visit to Lebanon, and another who had been hosted in Egypt.
- **Informal dialogue and dinner with young British people**. Young Arab Voices joined young British and European students and graduates for an informal discussion, which continued over a traditional British fish and chips or curry supper. The evening gave the visitors the chance to get to know young people from Britain in a relaxed and friendly environment. They enjoyed warm and lively conversations about what it's like to be young in the Arab world and the UK, and some engaging exchanges over current issues such as cultural integration in the UK and the responsibility of Europe towards refugees fleeing conflicts in the Middle East. *"We realised we actually had much in common"*, commented one young British participant, *"I'd generally thought of the refugee problem, for instance, or terrorism, as something Britain and Europe faces. We were reminded that we're all in this together."*



- Lunch and an off-the-record conversation at **BBC Broadcasting House** with Frank Gardner, the BBC's Senior Security Correspondent. Gardner is one of the BBC's most prominent and widely travelled journalists despite having been shot and partially paralysed by Islamic extremists in Saudi Arabia 11 years ago. Speaking to the group in both English and Arabic, Gardner described his enduring passion for the Middle East region, and for free journalism. He urged the group to pursue their dreams and never give up, inspiring words that were for many the most striking and memorable of the whole week. Hosting the encounter was BAX alumnus Denis Nowlan, BBC Manager of Radios 3, 4 and 4Extra, with Hugh Levinson, BBC Head of Radio Current Affairs, who commented "*The visitors were a very stimulating group, and it was exciting to meet them!*"

- **A debate at Kings College London** about extremism in both Europe and the Middle East, looking at the similarities in the language of extreme Islamists to that of far-right political groups, and the impact of social media

on the advance of extremism. In addition to the participation of the Young Arab Voices team, there were speakers from Faith Matters, which builds bridges of understanding between faith communities in the UK.



- A morning and lunch at the **Southwark Day Centre for Asylum-Seekers**, meeting recent migrant arrivals to the UK, operation managers and volunteers helping migrants to survive and find their way in London. *“We were grouped round tables, and the issues chosen for discussion led to an animated sharing of in-country experience which was then summarised and fed back to the plenary”*, said one participant. The YAV visitors also heard from volunteers running the Centre, as well as Farida Stanikzai, herself a refugee from Afghanistan, who now runs the Barnet Refugee Projects involving a range of North London communities. The discussion was expertly moderated by BAX alumnus Roland Singer-Kingsmith, and carried on over a shared lunch. The YAV visitors exchanged contacts with volunteers and Day Centre clients, and insisted they join the Farewell Reception on the final day of the YAV week.

- **A parliamentary round table discussion.** The Young Arab Voices toured the Houses of Parliament, and were invited to discuss the topic “Why young people join ISIL-Daesh?” with a group of Members of Parliament in a committee room in the House of Commons. On another occasion they were invited to lunch with a group of MP’s researchers to discuss UK-MENA relations.



- **A public debate in the Great Hall at Lincoln’s Inn** presented by the Young Arab Voices team, which explored from all angles the topic: *This house believes that democracy is not crucial to stability in the Middle East and North Africa.* The event was facilitated by the International Debate Education Association (IDEA).

- **A guided tour of St Paul’s Cathedral** to provide a panoramic view of London and the UK, both physically and historically. A chance to absorb some British culture and background to life in the City.

- Discussions with journalists at **BBC Arabic Television**, some of whom interviewed the participants.

- An encounter with Dr Bilal Hassam at **British Muslim**

TV, to explore how British and Muslim identities intertwine in modern day Britain.

- A visit to **Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs**, the independent policy institute which encourages debate on global issues.

- A **farewell reception**, giving the Young Arab Voices team the chance to report back on their week, answer questions about their countries, and enjoy a meal with many of those they had met during the past days. Their sense of purpose and interest in civil society engagement was clear. Comments made by the YAV visitors at the reception included:

“This was an empowering programme, I feel inspired that I could achieve anything.”

“I feel inspired by seeing people involved in civil society despite their own hardships – we saw this for instance at the refugee centre, and in stories like Frank Gardner’s.”

“As a woman I’ve grown in confidence. I was shy and now I’m strong.”

“People looked to us as people who could steer the Middle East in a positive direction.”

“I will pursue public policy, and have already talked about medical collaboration with the refugee centre we visited.”

“There’s a lot of pessimism around, but I’m here, succeeding, volunteering in civil society projects, and I will stand up to it.”

“There has been a perception that our young people are only capable of demonstrations and protest. Now we have a bigger hope for the region and our whole world.”

“I’ve taken leadership of myself. Step by step I will take leadership locally, regionally and globally.”

LOOKING AHEAD

The Young Arab Voices delegates brought a refreshing sense of optimism at a time when Europe and the Middle East/North African region face ever-deepening crisis.

The encouragement they brought to London was expressed by one young asylum-seeker from Burundi, still homeless after four years, who met the group on their visit to Southwark and who re-joined them at their final Reception.

“I feel so lost, sometimes frustrated” he wrote after the visit, *“but being involved with these young people has made me feel young at heart and proud that even in our disadvantaged positions there is still hope if we can all believe in each other as true human beings of equal measure and value. Such programmes look to tap and influence change wherever and whenever. I am so honoured to have had an opportunity to meet and share our life experiences. Thank you all.”*

British-Arab Exchanges (BAX) wants to continue to provide support to these visitors and others who follow, in whatever ways it can find to do so. The long-term impact of such a visit could be substantial, on both sides of the exchange. At the same time, the challenges faced by the participants as they return to their countries must not be forgotten.

One of the Young Arab Voices visitors emailed her new British friends: *“The return home has a bittersweet taste. I am happy to come back with a different mindset but I miss the people I met during the program and their enthusiasm. I am confident though that I shall bring to my*

peers the same joy you have put into our hearts. You can indeed sleep peacefully as your teachings will remain engraved in us. The journey towards change has just begun.”

