

YOUTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

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The Future Today: Youth and Adolescents of the Middle East and North Africa

Situation Analysis on
Adolescents and Youth in MENA

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Background Paper

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Youth in the Arab World

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The Series includes papers and analytical texts that were written during a consultative process undertaken by UNICEF MENA-RO and AUB-IFI to inform the themes explored and discussed in the report “A Generation on the Move: Insights into the Condition, Aspirations and Activism of Arab Youth” between 2009 and 2011.

The papers discuss issues explored throughout the different chapters of the report, or brief youth situation analysis in specific countries. Methodologies used include reviews of existing literature, quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation.

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MENA Youth: Today's Future

Calls for attention to children and youth are usually couched in future thinking: The children and youth of today will be the bulk of the population tomorrow, so we need to pay attention to them today. In much of the Middle East and North Africa, the reality is reversed. Children and youth are the bulk of today's population. In all the MENA countries, those under 29 constitute a minimum of one half and up to two-thirds of the population. Today's demographic reality has triggered, at least among some academics if not political leaders, a sense of urgency. The issues which call for concern are the categories of "youth" and "adolescents"; the "youth bulge"; concerns about "waithood"; the imagined economic opportunity produced by the youth bulge; the contentious demands for inclusion; and the anxieties about the "crisis of youth".

Classifying By Ages

The categories of "youth" and "adolescents" are, to a large extent, 20th century inventions which have mobilized much global popular imagination, but have not produced consensus for definitions. Age grading has not been a particular feature of MENA societies historically. The group encompassed within the category of "youth" is used by social scientists and political commentators to include variously those 14-25, 15-25, 15-29 and sometimes up to 35 or 40. "Adolescents" similarly has a variable range from 12 or 13 up to 19-22 or so. As these categories almost always overlap, I will use the category of "youth" to address some of the issues this classificatory intervention has raised.

Shifting Meanings of Youth

Youth became a salient category in the MENA in the 1920's--1940's as nationalist movements mobilized for independence. Some MENA leaders (especially in Lebanon and Syria) founded organizations based on fascist youth movements in Germany and Italy to stimulate political awareness. Youth movements appeared in Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Iran and other MENA countries. Youth became a vibrant category in the 1950's and 1960s for state mobilization, as many newly independent MENA states targeted youth to power up economic programs for state development. Youth were seen as the hope for the future in these nationalist imaginaries. By the 1970s (especially after the 1967 defeat of Arab countries in the Arab Israeli war) many of the "nationalisms" (Egyptian, pan-Arab, Turkish, Iranian) had muted or come to be regarded as failures, while others (Palestinian) were just being launched. The category of youth shifted meanings significantly in this period, which included, by the end of the decade, the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the Lebanese Civil War. As nationalist projects failed and many states were seen as derailed projects by their own citizens, or too weak, or too authoritarian, violence of various origins hopscotched throughout the region: The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the Iran/Iraq war (1980-1988), the First Gulf War (1991), a series of anti-government Islamic fronts in Algeria (1980s-1990's), the Algerian/Moroccan border war (1963-present), Kurdish nationalist movement and so forth--all of which relied upon youth as driving force. The events of 9/11 in the USA, the subsequent American-led invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) under the guise of the "war on terror", all had inscribed within them the sense that youth were driving MENA violence. The figure of the violent, suicide bomber, terrorist, Muslim youth took shape. The category of youth came to be seen as a problem rather than a promise.

In the United States and Europe the categories of youth and children became operant in the late 19th century as labor laws began to change to protect them and as the industrial idea of the family wage took hold. In the 20th century, the meanings of youth in the United States shifted many times, from the young rebellious flappers; to the orphans and homeless of the depression years; to those who held up the nation in World War II and the Korean War; to those who fought without their nation's gratitude in Vietnam; to the flower children, the student non-violent movements, the student strikes of the 1960's and 1970s, the civil rights movements and the women's movements; to the 1980s individual-focused self-help movement; to more socially oriented causes such as the environmental movement in the 1990's and the early 21st century--all of which were propelled largely by youth.

Youth in the US and Europe are studied in many ways in the 21st century. There is an interest in youth and technology, especially social media, the pressures of the economic decline on their futures, the increasing costs of education, etc. However, the overwhelming focus in the study of youth in the US and Europe for at least the past four decades or more has been psychological. The assumption that youth must individuate and separate from their parents and become their "own" persons has put an emphasis on their struggles for autonomy, implying emotional autonomy from their mothers and fathers.

Youth in the MENA region are less likely to be studied in psychodynamic terms (although such studies exist). The focus of most research is on socio/political/economic issues. They are discussed in terms of the failure of the educational system, the levels of poverty, the failure of the markets to create and sustain jobs and careers for them, their difficulties in creating and supporting families, and the lure of fundamentalist (especially religious) organizations for the youth. This more social focus in studies of MENA youth is consistent with the high value placed on family and family relations. It also emerges from the recognition that youth will need their families for economic and social support well into adulthood and that once they are well established, their families will need them for economic and social support.

MENA's Youth Bulge

The "youth bulge" refers to the demographic condition facing most of the MENA countries, especially in the Arab world (Piven 2010). Children and youth constitute two-thirds of the populations of almost all MENA countries. Adolescence and youth (the ages of 15-29) count over 100 million in MENA, claiming over 30% of the population of the region (Dhillon and Yousef 2007, 1). The main reason contributing to the "youth bulge" was the improved health conditions, leading to a decline in infant mortality in the 20th century. Fertility, however, did not begin to significantly decline until the 1970's. High fertility with improved infant survivability produced the biggest youth bulge the region has ever known. The growth rate, at about 2% per annum, is still higher than the world average of 1.2% (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi 2007,1). While there is unevenness in the region (Lebanon has a lower growth rate, while Palestine, Yemen, and Iraq have much higher fertility rates), the youth bulge will remain for a generation in the region until the expected general decline in fertility manifests itself in a reduction in youth.

The Economic Opportunity of the Youth Bulge

The disproportionate concentration of the population of most MENA countries under 29 years of age implies a huge labor force potential. Economists consider this an opportunity (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi 2007). The proportion of potential workers to nonworkers in these societies has achieved a "once in a life time" ratio. This ratio could allow the accumulation of benefits to sustain children and elders if youth can be mobilized to economic productivity. This high ratio of work-age to non-work-age population could allow for accumulation and savings for the future, if managed properly.

Proper management includes proper education and training for the economy and the labor force. The MENA region as a whole has a rather poor record of preparing youth for the labor force. The school systems are often still legacies of the colonial or immediately post-colonial period, lag behind in sciences and technology, and particularly under-serve girls (Al Fin 2008). Perhaps with the exception of the Gulf countries, where girls often have a higher educational rate than boys, in most of the MENA countries, there are high illiteracy rates among females.

Simultaneously, however, with the youth bulge offering this economic gift, employment of youth has actually reached crisis levels in many of the MENA countries. The world average of unemployment for youth is about 14%, but for the MENA region, it is 25% (Dhillon and Yousef 2007, 2). This gives MENA countries the unfortunate status of the highest unemployment rate for youth in the world. Economists argue this could be a tragic lost opportunity to prepare for the future when the ratios will surely change. The question is whether there is social and political will to reorganize resources to put the youth to work.

Youth on Hold: Waithood

Waithood has come to mean the postponement of marriage, family formation, independence, and, in some respects, adulthood for many youth. The lack of employment, the high cost of housing and living in many MENA countries, the increased concentration of the population (especially the young) in the higher cost of living urban areas, have all made it more difficult for the young to establish themselves apart from their families of origin. The difficulties of waithood for the youth is that the uncertainty is projected into the future. With their education not translating into immediate jobs, with their education often having little relevance to the job market, even for the college educated (Hammoud 2005), and with the doors to international immigration increasingly closing (Global Migration Group 2009), the young are often on hold—but do not know what they are on hold for. The stress and anxiety of waithood keeps youth dependent on their families of origin for a protracted period. It frustrates many of their dreams and expectations, in a world in which their expectations are often primed by global definitions of desire circulated through the web, media, movies and other new technologies. Social scientists have argued that such frustrations can become prime recruiting fuel for political and religious movements of various ideological tendencies. The question for policy makers is how to reduce waithood, or how to productively fill this period between education and adulthood for youth.

Youth and Inclusion

Youth in the MENA region, it is often said, feel excluded from society. Given that youth and children constitute the majority of society, this seems like a very peculiar assertion. One can make sense of this sense of exclusion by piecing together the picture of the youth bulge, waithood, poor educational systems, under or unemployment, poverty—all coupled with often highly ineffective, unstable, unresponsive, or autocratic governments. Governments in general in the MENA region have increasingly, over the past half century, closed the doors to political participation for the population as a whole, but for the young especially. The MENA region has the lowest rate of female political participation in the world, as measured by female office holders. It also has a very low rate of political participation of the young in formal politics. With states controlled often by family-based elites (including royalties), militaries, religious institutions, or exclusionary political parties, the young have little incentive or motivation to become involved in formal politics. Civil societies are themselves often controlled directly by governments or so regulated by governments in the MENA region that the non-governmental public sphere for political action is small and non-magnetic for youth. Some have argued that this too is food for extremist groups to mobilize the youth, as the formal channels for political participation are not open to them.

Some youth see involvement in Islamic political movements as a means of participation. The rise and spread of Islamic movements, whether religious, spiritual, social, or political, since the late 1970s (especially after the Iranian revolution) has been frequently noted. Expressed not only in the increased participation of youth in various Islamic organizations and political parties, but also in the rise of what is often called “Islamic” dress among women, the appeal of Islam as an alternative to contemporary social formations is relatively broad. Other youth seek direct political involvement. Most marked was the drama of the Iranian elections in the summer of 2009, when thousands of youth filled the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities to protest the manipulation of the elections by the clergy and the sitting government. While youth continue to be engaged in the Palestinian nationalist cause, marked disenchantment has also been noted. Nevertheless, specific events can draw youth in unexpected numbers, such as the stunning public pouring of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese into the streets in response to the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005. Some scholars have argued that the combination of a youth bulge and ineffective absorption of youth into formal political processes is associated with a prevalence of civil conflicts in some regions, of which MENA is one (Beehner 2007). The question for policy makers is whether there is political will to open the channels for youth to participate in formal politics. Since such opening requires profound structural and power changes, the prospects are not promising.

The Crisis of Youth: The Future Today

The prospects for youth are rather chilling in the region. Many of the young are anxious to leave their own countries. A visa and passport to another country (especially a Western country) is a dream of many of the region's youth. Those doors are largely closed. The doors to the Arab Gulf, once an outlet for the youth of Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, have also closed to some degree.

Around the region, one hears social commentators and scholars publically worrying about the "crisis" of youth. The crisis of youth refers to the existence of the largest youth bulge in the region's history; at a time when the educational system is often of very poor quality; the school to work transition is poorly managed; the unemployment rate for youth is the highest in the world; the delay in family formation and transition to adulthood has increased; and youth often do not sense a space for political participation or inclusion in social participation in their societies. With the majority of MENA societies under 29, the crisis of youth is a crisis for society.

That a certain number of youth, in this milieu, have been drawn to Islamist organizations of various ideological orientations, is not surprising. Those youth who have been drawn to the political expressions of Islam, however, still number a minority in the MENA region; those who are drawn to the more violent of those political movements represent an even smaller fraction of youth. Yet, this is often the representation of MENA youth around the world. MENA youth are often represented as violent, ideologically radical, prone to religious fanaticism--and most of all, they are represented as Muslim. Despite the great heterogeneity of the MENA region in religion, in ethnicities, in national cultural histories, the region and the youth of the region are usually painted in one broad brush stroke--Islamic and Islamic fundamentalist.

However, many more youth are hunkered down trying to survive, string out an education, work out a living. This is not surprising. A majority of the youth in the MENA region are disenchanted with their own governments and critical of transformations in their societies. This is also not surprising. Their focus is overwhelmingly on their families, trying to form families and hold together to their families of origin. In this regard, they share sentiments with youth in many areas of the world.

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