

# The Intellectual Debate on Youth and its Role in the Arab Uprisings (Part 1)

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## Summary:

This is the first part of a discussion that examines the intellectual debate within Middle East studies regarding the role(s) that youth has played in the recent political economy of Arab societies including the Arab uprisings. Specific attention will be given to the contributions made by economists and other social scientists to the intellectual understanding of the changing demographic makeup of Arab populations and the impact that it has had on their development. It will also speculate on why Middle East political science has had very little to add to it.

Part II (to be published later in 2014) will turn its attention to the partisan political debate that is still unfolding in the Middle East on the contributions that youth has (or has not) made with Egypt as a case in point. Its goal will be to shed a different light on our understanding of the challenges and the dilemmas that this important actor faces, which it, in turn, presents to the states in the region.

What both efforts share is an appreciation of the fact that youth is an ambiguous category that needs to be refined to capture the class, gender, ethnic and generational experiences of those that it includes. This same diversity makes the articulation of the economic and political preoccupations of this non-state actor additionally complex. Yet, Middle East political science must nevertheless make these efforts if it is to assess the direction of change in these very youthful societies and the ability of their states to manage the current transitions of which this sizable group is a part. If you add to this the political mobilization of this group by the Arab uprisings and the challenges that their demands for change have posed to the states of the region, one cannot but appreciate the importance of any and all attempts to understand their concerns.

**Key Words:**

Demography, neo-liberalism, generation in waiting, youth unemployment, Arab uprisings

**Analysis:**

**The Promise of and the Challenges Faced by the Generation in Waiting:**

Before the unfolding of the Arab uprisings in 2011, economists and social scientists had begun the discussion of the changing demographic face of Arab societies and its varied policy implications. The *United Nations Arab Human Development Report of 2002* pointed to the emergence of a new generation that was the beneficiary of a regional educational revolution that doubled the number of its literate population.<sup>1</sup> Not only were they better educated, but they reflected a more equitable representation of men and women in their ranks. Members of that generation were born between 1980-1995 and represented 30 percent of the region's population, 100 million strong. While they added to the human capital of the region, the economic fortunes of this cohort, which was between the ages of 15 and 29 representing 47 percent of its working age population,<sup>2</sup> gave analysts cause for concern.

Despite their educational accomplishments, there were many signs that they were struggling to reach important markers of the transition to adulthood. The switch to neoliberal (market) development models confronted them with major obstacles. The most powerful of these has been large scale unemployment that has largely affected them as the last entrants to the labor market. Their job prospects were affected by the dismantling and/or privatization of the public sector as well as the contraction of the state sector which had provided important social services and sources of good and stable employment to the generation of their fathers. While the private sector was expected to emerge as the supplier of new jobs, it did not provide the numbers or the stable type of jobs that most young men and women waited for before they could embark on marriage and family formation as other important markers of adulthood.

Education which had emerged in the 1980s as the entry point to the middle class was transformed by neoliberalism into a new indicator of class privilege with access to private tutoring and schools that gave one language and other skills necessary to make one competitive in a crowded market place.<sup>3</sup> The challenges faced by this generation were also gendered with female unemployment much higher than that faced by men forcing women into economic inactivity. As a result, female labor force participation stood at 25 percent in the Middle East representing the lowest rate in comparison to other world regions.<sup>4</sup> These class and gender inequalities identified some of the key challenges facing the “generation in waiting”: the wait for good jobs that were well paid, stable and provided benefits was not equal and had complex social implications for the young men and women affecting their ability to get married.

While the “generation in waiting” was a global phenomenon, it was important to note that the region was more youthful than the rest of the world: the median age was 22 in 2009 in comparison to 29 for the rest of the world. Sixty percent of the population was less than 25, but its youth unemployment was twice the world average.<sup>5</sup> More recent statistics suggested the continuation of these trends with Arab populations remaining young with “nearly 55 percent of the population is under the age of 24 and two thirds under 30”.<sup>6</sup>

Wait unemployment produced by the long school to work transition was complicated further by the high cost of marriage in the Middle East reflecting higher housing costs and the social expectation of providing for all the needs of a couple including furniture and domestic appliances before, not after marriage. This added other obstacles for young men and women seeking to form a family as a major marker of independence and adulthood. “Wait adulthood” prolonged the period of adolescence i.e. dependence on one’s family by living at home, abiding by the moral and social rules set by one’s parents and relying on their and one’s savings for marriage.<sup>7</sup> In Egypt, it took at least 7 years of savings by working class men and women and those of their families to cover the costs of marriage.<sup>8</sup> In socially conservative societies where relations between men and women outside of the marriage institution are circumscribed, the longer wait before marriage complicated the satisfaction of the needs for intimacy and sexuality for Muslims and Christians alike. As a result, “only 50 percent of men ... between the ages of twenty five and twenty nine are married as compared to 77 percent of East Asian and 69 percent of Latin American men”.<sup>9</sup>

With its state centered and institutionalist bias, Middle East political science showed itself to be for most part disinterested in the study of youth as a key non-state actor and the complex issues and concerns which it brought to the discussion of the major social and economic changes in the economic and social structures of Arab societies and a broader definition of politics. The work of Diane Singerman on working class families in Egypt and how they provided an alternative avenue of political participation was the major exception that proved the rule. It led her to an early appreciation of how the high cost of marriage presented a major challenge facing most of families with grown up children caught in the phenomenon of “wait adulthood”<sup>10</sup> when the field of Middle

East political science did not sufficiently appreciate the political challenges that youth unemployment and its social consequences played in making them available for political mobilization. One author admitted as much suggesting that the disciplinary preoccupation with the study of authoritarianism tended to exaggerate the institutional bases of regime stability discounting the “possibility of successful mass mobilization” and overestimating the “neo-liberal reform and the corrosive effects of demographic change and new media”.<sup>11</sup> Another author suggested that the upgrading of post-democratization studies, the other macro theoretical pre-occupation of the field, should in the wake of the Arab uprisings be “taken outside the confined spaces of political parties and institutions” to consider other non-institutionalized forms.<sup>12</sup>

If the discussion of the political orientations and interests of this large young generation has not gotten the serious attention it deserved in political science, sociologists and anthropologists have questioned some of the misleading assumptions made about young Muslim men and women in the post 9/11 world. Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera contested the prevalent conservative representation of this large generation of young men and women as supporters of Islamic extremism. They pointed to John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed’s analysis of the Gallup World Poll representing 90% of the world’s Muslims (1.3 billion people) from 35 countries, which showed that “neither unemployment nor job status differentiate radicals from moderates. No difference exists in the unemployment rate among the politically radicalized and moderates; both are approximately 20%”.<sup>13</sup> The post 9/11 misrepresentations overlooked the fact that perpetrators and their leaders were highly educated and employable underlining a need for other explanations for Muslim youth’s engagement especially between the two ends of the political spectrum.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the early accounts of the Arab uprisings did not particularly heed that call. Some chose to represent Arab youth, who were prominently represented in the protest movements that led to the unseating of the many of reigning patriarchs, as “the vanguard of democracy” triggering these protests and paying the price for them with their lives.<sup>15</sup> One can include in this list Mohammed Bouazizi, the fruit vendor in Sidi Bouzid, whose cart was confiscated and his failure to retrieve it led him to set himself on fire triggering the events that led to the Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to step down and the regional spread of the Arab uprisings. Khalid Said in Egypt, who was arrested, tortured and died in police custody in 2010, similarly contributed to the spread of political mobilization that set the stage for the successful protests of January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

Without seeking to detract from the roles that these young icons played in the initial phase of the Arab uprisings, there is still a need to move the discussion to the study of formal and/or new informal organizations that some youth groups developed in addressing their existing polarized and fragmented publics. For this, a detailed discussion of the Egyptian case may provide some appreciation of the challenges that this effort entailed, its partisan constructions of and/or political debate on the roles that young men and women should (or should not play) in this transitional period.

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ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Development Program, *the Arab Human Development Report 2002* (New York: the United Nations Development Program, 2002), pp. 6-7, 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> Navtej Dhillon, Tarik Yousef, *Generation in Waiting, the Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Magdi Amin, Ragui Assaad, Nazar al-Baharna, Kemal Dervis, Raj M. Desai, Navtej S. Dhillon, Ahmed Galal, Hafez Ghanem, Carol Graham and Daniel Kaufman (London: Oxford Scholarship online, 2012), p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Amin *et al*, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution* (London: C. Hurst and Co. Publishers, 2011), p.

<sup>6</sup> Amin *et al*, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Diane Singerman, *The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities among Youth in the Middle East*, the Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper no. 6, September 2007 (Washington DC: Wolfenson Center for Development and the Dubai School of Government).

<sup>8</sup> Diane Singerman, "Youth, Gender and Dignity in the Egyptian Uprising" *JMEWS: Journal of Middle East Women Studies* 9, 3 (Fall 2013), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Singerman, *The Economic Imperatives of Marriage*.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Gause III, "The Middle East Community and the Winter of Arab Discontent", *Seismic Shift: Understanding Change in the Middle East* (Washington DC: Stimson Center, May 2011), pp. 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Morton Valbjørn, "Upgrading Post-Democratization Studies: Examining a Re-politicized Arab World in a Transition to Somewhere", *Middle East Critique* (March 2012), pp. 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (cited in Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera, ed., *Being Young and Muslim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera, ed., *Being Young and Muslim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.

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<sup>15</sup> Filiu, p.