

**The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and
International Affairs at AUB
The Goethe Institute**

**“Studying Youth in the Arab World”
January 13-14, 2009**

Prepared by Sara Mourad

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and the Goethe Institute
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“Youth are a parameter of other wider realities in the region,” says Rami Khouri, director of the Issam Fares Institute in AUB. In the backdrop of the lack of serious, consistent, credible, and productive centers studying youth issues in the Arab world, the Issam Fares Institute is taking the lead in coalescing research initiatives around the region in an attempt to identify critical knowledge gaps and influence Arab policy-making on youth affairs.

In collaboration with the Goethe Institute, IFI inaugurated an annual seminar dedicated to “Studying Youth in the Arab World,” as part of its Research and Policy Forum on Youth in the Arab World. The seminar gathered around 15 scholars, researchers, and civil society members to present and discuss their research on the different aspects of the lives of Arab youth. The seminar, which covered an array of topics, found its main focus on youth unemployment, identity issues, and political participation. Abdallah Annan of the Goethe Institute finds that the lack of substantive and representative data on youth paves way for ideological interpretations of their situation. In this light, the experience of the German Shell Foundation is of great relevance as it relies on empirical data in studying German youth. The presentation of the Shell Youth Study provides a window for cross-comparative perspectives on youth as a universally distinctive demographic group. But are Arab youth more than a demographic bulge? Do they share common political, social, economic, and cultural issues? And why is there a need to study youth in the first place?

Why study youth?

“There is no one who wakes up every morning to look at the situation of Arab youth,” says Khouri. Being a neglected segment of society in terms of political participation, access to health services, and freedoms, youth share a number of characteristics worthy of further investigation. Youth make up “the most unserious sector in the Arab world with the most unserious policies,” according to Khouri. “The absence of youth policy is a policy itself,” asserts Jamil Mouawad of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

On the research level the picture looks gloomy: there is no proper clearinghouse of data on Arab youth. The absence of a valuable record of previous research often leads to a duplication of efforts and overlap of studies. Statistical frames used in past surveys are also extremely important for researchers and yet remain unavailable. The lack of raw data and the delay of result publication are cited by Dr. Riad Tabbara as major obstacles encountered by researchers today.

The role of IFI becomes relevant as a link between research and policy. With the lack of extensive studies on Arab youth and the chaotic state of existing research, IFI steps in with a program on Youth in The Arab World. Drawing on the policy-related research of AUB's internationally respected faculty, IFI aims to become a catalyst and central repository for regional and international research and policy analysis on Arab youth.

Arab Youth: More than a Demographic Bulge?

The Arab society is a largely youthful one. As the percentage of youth in world populations is dropping the Arab world is witnessing the opposite: around 60% of Arabs are below the age of 25. According to Paul Dyer of the Dubai School of Government, this constitutes a demographic window of opportunity given the right policy environment. Arab policymakers do not realize this. "While the West perceives youth as a demographic asset, the Arab world finds in them a demographic burden," says Dr. Rola Dashti of the Kuwait Economic Society. But the challenge lies in the definition of youth as an age group; where do we draw the line? While the UN defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, the definition of youth is not set as several factors need to be considered. For its Lebanon National Youth Profile, UNESCO stretches the age group to include persons up to 29 years of age. Mathias Albert, co-author of the last two Shell Youth Studies, notes that the youth category is starting to include children as young as 12 years. This extension of "youth" in both directions is attributed to a number of developments. On the one hand, young children are entering the consumer market, becoming sexually active, and taking distance from their families earlier. On the other hand, the transition to adulthood is delayed, with economic pressures preventing marriage and financial independence at a young age. Following his experience in the Lebanon National Youth Profile, Dr. Ramzi Salame believes that defining youth requires a degree of arbitrariness and flexibility as the lines between young and adult have become increasingly blurred.

Waithood

There is wide consensus that youth is a new phase that did not previously exist in the Arab world. Older generations often got married, had children, and managed households in their teenage years. This new "youth" phase is also stretched and prolonged. The notion of "Waithood," a term coined by Diane Singerman in her research on Middle Eastern youth, is based on this new reality. Waithood ("wait" + "adulthood") is "the bewildering time in which large proportions of Middle Eastern youth spend their best years waiting." It is a period when the difficulties youth face in different spheres of life create a feeling of helplessness and dependency. Dr. Samir Khalaf, professor of sociology at AUB, explains that frustrated youth have three options: Freeze and accept their conditions, Fight the status quo, or take Flight and leave their countries. The predominant tendency seems to be waiting for education, housing,

marriage, employment, and credit. But if youth are in waiting mode, what is it that they do? What drives their energy? And what other social and political challenges do they face?

Unemployment

“Arab states are facing an inherent challenge in job creation for an unprecedented growth of new entrants in the labor market” says Dyer. This places the issue of unemployment at the core of any study on Arab youth. According to the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, the majority of Arab youth believes that now is not a good time to get a job. With the exception of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, there is a prevailing feeling of skepticism among the youth of the region. Although some countries experience high growth rates, such as Kuwait and other GCC member states, Dashti finds that the “The Arab countries’ double-digit growth is met with double-digit unemployment rates.” The states’ failure to generate jobs stems from an overall failure to create good governance systems. According to Dr. Jad Chaaban of the American University of Beirut, what the Arabs need is not more money but better ways to spend it.

Unemployment affects in particular the most educated youth. According to Khalaf, “It is the most skilled, urban, and cosmopolitan who suffer from unemployment.” This constitutes a brain drain throughout the region whereby young adults leave in search of more promising prospects. The Arab world is therefore losing much of its intellectual capacity, which not only affects its economies but also has repercussions for its societies. With a skewed ratio of male to female, Arab young men have become a scarce social capital. “Sisterhood has disappeared as young women compete for the male ‘catch’,” says Khalaf.

The costs of youth unemployment and other types of youth exclusion constitute the subject-matter of Chaaban’s study. Calculating the costs of lost youth productivity, Chaaban hopes to place an alarming issue on the agenda of policymakers. “When you tell people they are losing money, they care more,” he explains. Early school leaving, adolescent pregnancy, joblessness, and migration are indicators of youth exclusion from the economy. Joblessness (unemployed and not in school) in Egypt alone foregoes 8% of the potential GDP. While Chaaban’s study focuses on lost productivity, the true costs of youth exclusion are much higher.

So are the costs of disguised unemployment. According to Dashti, the calculated average of productivity of Kuwaitis per day is 20 minutes; although officially employed, most Kuwaiti youth are not actually productive. The social implications of the mismatch between youth energy and productivity can be observed in existing drug abuse rates, increasing delinquency, adolescent crimes and extreme religiosity.

Religion, Identity, and subcultures

Religiosity is growing in the Arab world, with higher numbers of youth surveyed and polled defining themselves as “Muslim” first. According to a survey directed by Dr. Musa Shteivi from

the University of Jordan, more Jordanian youth choose to define themselves as Muslim first. Identity, however, is not mutually exclusive and comes in many layers, often changing according to a given situation. During elections for instance, Shteivi finds a shift towards primordial traditional identities such as the family or the tribe.

Religion, nationalism and family aside, youth are also forming different subcultures, some of which combine elements of the post-modern and the traditional. Taqwacore, a group of young Black Islamists in the US, mixes rock music and the Qur'an to reach out to society. In the Arab world, youth are contesting the status quo in other unconventional ways. The Lebanese upper class youth has created its own order in a distinctive nightlife where valets park cars and women don't get drunk. The night club, a supposedly "let go" setting, "has become a place to find rigid control in a society out of control," explains Khalaf. In Algiers, young "*Haitists*" (from *Hait*, Arabic for wall) have embraced the wall as their own channel of self-expression.

Shifting Moral Authorities

Creative ways of self-expression are used to articulate the rather complex reality of youth today. While the past generation experienced "a moment of modernity" and had it easy, Khalaf believes that today's youth face new challenges and blurred boundaries. They are disenchanted and disaffected by their surroundings and they often have no voice to say so. Referring to Foucault's theory on late modernity and its generation of new forms of resistance and agency, Khalaf wonders how youth are active today and how they resist their conditions.

Furthermore, the family as a central unit of socialization is losing its integrality function. In Lebanon and the Arab world, Khalaf notes a new form of social hypocrisy whereby the attachment to family has become surface-deep. Family, while still receiving deference, is often seen by youth as irrelevant to their lives. Family is becoming a ritual rather than a haven and is dubbed as the "most dramatic false consciousness" in the Arab world by Khalaf. While losing its traditional status, the family is being replaced by new institutions and moral entrepreneurs. When in need of advice, youth are turning to online chat rooms as the ultimate source of knowledge and advice. Friends, religious figures and subcultures are also considered new moral entrepreneurs whose ideas are incorporated as role models.

Self-made young women

Young Arab women are seen to be doing much better than their male counterparts. According to Khalaf, young women are preparing for a future where they will be pushed around. Trying to make it in a patriarchal society, they use education as a means to acquire and develop social capital. "The fear of being at risk pushes women to outperform men," asserts Khalaf. In addition, as the tendency to opt for male candidates in the labor force persists, more women find themselves unemployed and pursue tertiary education.

Young Arab women also face socio-cultural pressures and suffer the most from dissonant social scripts: They are celebrated for being sexually attractive yet they are cursed if they become sexually active. Toilet graffiti in universities such as AUB bear witness to this dissonance; women send sexual erotic messages. While they cannot voice their thoughts out in the open, they do so behind closed doors.

At the same time, women are enjoying new freedoms and acquiring special roles. The number of women entering the labor market is increasing; in Kuwait, Dashti finds that between the ages of 20 and 24, more women than men are working. Young women have also become the main producers and consumers of what Khalaf calls “post-modern values.” Today, more than ever, society is witnessing the emergence of self-made young Arab women.

Political and Civic Engagement

Uprising and youth-less change

Arab youth are disenchanted with politics. They live a dramatic rupture with the state, perceived as defective in responding to their concerns and needs for democracy and liberty. Arab state breakdown, highlighted by post-imperialist failures and Arab defeat against Israel, is strongly felt by youth today. According to Ahmad Younis of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, Arab youth believe in their ability to succeed in the future while having low expectations for their own countries’ success.

Defining the nature of youth engagement is more challenging today. Despite increasing political apathy, youth are willing to do something for the common good; however, they are less inclined to do it in a fixed organizational structure. According to Albert, they prefer forms of participation where they can contribute to change without a long-term, binding commitment. “Youth express themselves in ways others are afraid to use such as the internet and graffiti. These methods enable them to bypass Arab state security,” explains Khouri. Discussing the particular case of Lebanon, Dr. Farid el Khazen asserts that the March 14 spring uprising in 2005 is an example of a youth-led political movement that resulted in the ousting of Syrian troops from Lebanon. According to him, youth worked together for a common cause beyond their different political affiliations and socio-religious backgrounds.

Some are more skeptical about youth political engagement. Jamil Mouawad of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies talks about “youth-less change.” Patriarchal society, low self-confidence, rote pedagogy, and the iron grip of political parties are some of the factors hindering youth political participation. According to Mouawad, young people in Lebanon crawl back to powerful political parties in order to access resources; youth remain no more than political servants fulfilling the established elite’s agenda. Mouawad points out that the March 14 youth have failed to bring about the rise of a new political elite and to fulfill a real

democratic transition. In fact, there is a gap between youth political belief and political activism: while youth believe in the need for political reform, they are not acting accordingly. Increasingly distancing themselves from political establishments and institutions, Arab youth have found alternative channels for self-expression. "They are doing something in private and taking things into their own hands by using a series of mechanisms, often with a religious dimension," explains Khouri. Arabs in general, and Arab youth in particular, are doing politics in a non-political way.

Volunteer work

Youth civic engagement is also a matter of discussion. According to a poll conducted by the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, the majority of Arab youth do not volunteer in civil society organizations; only Lebanon stands out with unmatched rates of civic engagement. Arguably, the majority of youth say that they would help complete strangers, which raises the question as to what really constitutes civic engagement in Arab societies. While some remain skeptical of the true ability of non-governmental organizations to effect change, some civil society experiences were proven quite successful.

In Egypt, the example of Al Resala Charity Organization stands out with high numbers of youth volunteers. Noha Abu el- Gheit from Al Resala explained that political involvement does not always provide a channel for youth self-expression. Far from political activism, Al Resala focuses on education, healthcare services, recycling, and social welfare. According to Abu el-Gheit, volunteer work is crucial in channeling youth energy in a positive direction. Not only are young volunteers feeling the joy of giving, they are also developing personal leadership skills. Al Resala, now the largest volunteer charity organization in Egypt, is the result of a student initiative in the Engineering Faculty in Cairo University.

Relationship with the West

The majority of Arab youth chooses the US as its main immigration destination all the while holding anti-American sentiments. This attitude is attributed to three aspects of the United States: its political domination, the acute conflicts it creates and sustains, and the cultural disrespect that has manifested itself in the Abu Ghraib scandal and the Muslim terrorist stereotype. On the other hand, Arab youth admire the technological advancements, civil freedoms and democratic political system in the United States. But they remain skeptical about the US role in the Arab world. In a poll conducted by the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, most young Arabs do not believe that the US or its president would play a catalyst role in political change in the region. The majority of Arab youth would rather see the US promoting job creation and playing a significant role in the region's economic development.

Forced to leave due to dire economic conditions, Arab youth share a “perception that obstacles can be breached if a person leaves and then returns home,” explains Younis. But Arab youth are often prevented from entering the US and Europe and treated as potential terrorists. Meanwhile, Americans and Europeans are increasingly coming to the Middle East in order to take on great jobs and to conduct research to understand the region.

Conclusion

“Youth in the Middle East and the North Africa region have an irrational sense of hope and optimism,” says Ahmad Younis. Faced with economic recession, political stagnation, and dissonant social scripts, they still believe that the future is promising. In the meantime, they wait.

Celebrated as the hope of the future yet stigmatized as a source of chaos, Arab youth suffer from society’s dissonant perceptions. Today, there is a need to reverse the basic research hypothesis. The question of why the young are a burden should fall. Instead, one should ask: why is society a nuisance to the young? Or so Samir Khalaf believes.