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ISSUES IN BRIEF

Adulthood Denied: Youth Dissatisfaction and the Arab Spring

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While revolutions are most often viewed as rebellion against a specific political regime or economic system, youth participation in "the Arab Spring" must also be examined as an expression of a powerful socio-cultural frustration: the inability of youth to achieve adulthood, held back in part by both governments and markets that stall youth engagement. The most basic of societal contracts—that children will one day become adults, contribute productively to society, and raise families of their own—has been broken for an entire generation of youth in the Arab world trapped behind a threshold. The infectiousness of the Arab Spring revolutions stemmed from the realization by youth in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere that their generation was living in an undignified liminal state of pre-adulthood, and that the possibility of demanding access to education, jobs, and marriage was open to all Arab youth.

The success of various states in the region in the longer-term future will depend on a coherent strategy to improve education, increase employment opportunities, and assist young Arabs in affording the marriages necessary for youth to embrace adult social status. Any future democratic government born in the Arab Spring will not only require the participation of youth, but must also address the concerns of youth in both the short and long term.

> "The average Arab student gains less from time spent in school than youth anywhere else in the world."

Causes of Permanent Pre-Adulthood

A variety of socio-cultural realities in the Arab world entrap Arab youth in a liminal phase of pre-adulthood. Demographic transitions caused by improved living standards led to unbalanced age cohorts in society. In 2011, one in five Arabs has "come of age" (15-24 years old) and is seeking to finish schooling, find a job, and get married. Another 30 percent of the population is under the age of 15, and will want opportunities of their own in the coming decades (Abdel-Gadir and Abu-Ismail 2009). In the Arab world in particular, where the education and job markets have only recently embraced women's participation, the absolute increase in opportunities required is staggering.

Education: With the threat of youth bulges looming on the horizon, throughout the 1970s and 1980s many Arab states launched massive educational reforms, which significantly increased participation in educational programs, improved access to education for the rural, poor and other vulnerable segments of the population, closed the gender gap in relation to enrollment and graduation, and reduced illiteracy. Still, when Arab youth are actually tested on skills and knowledge, the progress of education in the Arab world is revealed to be a mirage. The average Arab student gains less from time spent in school than youth anywhere else in the world. Arab students score lower than average in both math and science on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Dhillon, Dyer and Yousef 2010:19). Only 49.7 percent of Egyptian girls graduating from the state-required minimum years of schooling (age 15+) could pass a basic literacy test (Assaad and Barsoum 2007). Arab schools struggle with numerous pedagogical problems: students spend hours copying from blackboards, with eyes buried in textbooks or focused on a sole teacher addressing the class in oral repetitions of lists of facts (Adams and Winthrop 2011). Creative or original activities, group work, debate, and expression of opinion are rare. Ultimately, education in the Arab world fails to prepare youth for employment, a fact they are increasingly well aware of as they struggle to find jobs.

Unemployment: At 10.3 percent in 2010, the Arab world has maintained the highest unemployment rate in the world for many years (ILO 2011). According to the United Nations Development Program and the League of Arab States, nations of the Arab world must collectively create 51 million jobs by 2020 simply to meet demand for jobs from the currently unemployed and youth who will be entering the job market soon (Abdel-Gadir and Abu-Ismail 2009:32-33).

> "Arab youth are *over-educated,* not *well-educated*, and their stalled status reminds them of that difference daily."

The Arab world also hosts a unique conundrum: the more education one has, the less likely one is to secure employment. In Morocco, for example, the unemployment rate for youths age 15-24 in 2004 was 7.7 percent for workers without a diploma, 28.1 percent for those with a baccalaureate, and 61.2 percent for those with a university diploma or better (Boudarbat and Ajbilou 2007). In Jordan, where education is Queen Rania's focus, 53 percent of unemployed youth have a university degree or better (ETF 2005).

For many Arab youth, then, education has failed. The objective of education is to gain the skills and expertise necessary to secure long-term employment, but more education has not led to increased employability. The end result is a feeling that one has "put in his time" and is entitled to a better shot at getting a preferred job; when this contract is broken, the individual

feels he has "studied for no reason" and wasted time progressing toward financial security. This frustration has obvious implications. Brookings Institute analysts recently noted, "these revolutions were not propagated by well-educated youth; these uprisings were spurred by the needs and demands of poorly educated youth, whose knowledge and skills do not meet the demands of a rapidly-advancing world" (Adams and Winthrop 2011). The myth of the well-educated youth gained popularity throughout the West during media coverage of Egypt's revolution and other Arab Spring demonstrations, but many of the demonstrators were the product of the poor educational systems of the Arab world. Arab youth are *over-educated,* not *well-educated,* and their stalled status reminds them of that difference daily.

"By attempting to replace the social bonds of marriage with financial bonds, many Arab societies have limited their youths' ability to marry at all."

Delayed marriage: As anthropologist Diane Singerman points out, "it is only through marriage that adolescents gain adult status due to social, cultural, and religious norms, yet young people marry at a later age in the Middle East (31 years of age for men, 23 for women) than anywhere else in the globe except for China" (2008:76). If marriage ends the adolescent liminal phase, then delay of marriage delays starting a family, obtaining social acceptance, and fulfilling the individual's socio-religious adult role. For most youth in the Arab world, marrying and raising a family are non-negotiable life goals, but marriage does not come cheap. Singerman determined that the average cost of marriage in Egypt in 1999 was LE 20,194 (USD $6,000); this equaled more than four and a half times GNP per capita in 1999 and eleven times the annual household expenditure. By 2005, that cost had risen to over LE 32,000 (USD $7,000), according to the 2006 Egyptian Labor Market Panel Survey (Singerman 2008).

Compounding this rise in marriage costs is the hidden expense of dowry. A dowry passes from groom to bride, and if the groom subsequently initiates divorce, she keeps the dowry as payment. Dowry is a particularly complex cost, as it is a marker of social relations. When families married their youth to cousins, trusted members of the tribe or neighborhood, or family friends, these marriages were backed with the social reassurances that both groups would help the young couple have a successful marriage. Marriage was a social contract that unified groups and families, and thus was unlikely to end in divorce. As the nature of marriage changes and more youth marry out of love and desire, divorce rates have increased and dowry has become the main deterrent for divorce. The result is skyrocketing dowry costs. In Yemen, for example, dowry costs have risen from USD $200 to upwards of USD $20,000 within the last generation. By attempting to replace the social bonds of marriage with financial bonds, many Arab societies have limited their youths' ability to marry at all.

The rising cost of housing presents another frustrating challenge. The Arab world is experiencing a small housing crisis brought on by a combination of misdirected development projects and misguided rent control. Housing prices across the board have risen in the past decade, alongside an increase in informal housing. This informal market offers little security to youth, particularly those who move from rural to urban environments looking for work. The long-term cultural implications ultimately revolve around changing ideas of personal autonomy, with a youth generation looking to "strike out on their own" while their countries' economic realities prevent them from finding housing and thus embracing the cultural change they seek.

Delayed sexuality: Delaying marriage in the Islamic Arab world also has a physical frustration attached; because sexual intercourse before marriage or outside of marriage is considered forbidden, delaying marriage can also delay sexual gratification, resulting in frustration caused by the "increasing gap between sexual maturity, beginning at puberty, and social maturity, the age at which it is socially responsible to get married" (Ali 2006:58). In the Islamic world, premarital and especially feminine virginity is emphasized in popular discourse and Islamist politics alike, and changing sexual norms are some of the most controversial topics debated in the Islamic world. This debate is, in part, because of changes in dress — particularly the emergence of the *muhajababe,* the hijab-wearing young Muslim woman in tight or revealing Western fashions — and changes in public mixing between genders at universities and workplaces.

This emerging debate also proceeds from trends that directly stem from the frustrations of delayed marriage: rising popularity of *urfi* marriages, increasing rates of single-motherhood, and growing interest in hymen repair surgery. Urfi marriages are secret social contracts between a male and a female, providing the religious framework to allow for sexual intercourse, but without requiring the financial obligations of dowry or marriage. While *urfi* marriages are largely condemned by Islamic religious authorities and scholarship, many youth feel they have no other option within the religious framework of their lives. In 2000, over 17 percent of university students in Egypt had taken part in *urfi* marriages. While the marriages allow for temporary sexual interaction, they do not include any legal recourse for the woman if she becomes pregnant.

Single-motherhood is on the rise across the Arab world. Rejected by society and often unwelcome in their own families, these single mothers are usually young, poor, unemployed, lacking housing, and desperate. An unexpected consequence of the failure of family formation, many single mothers will never be considered "marriage material" because of the assumed shame they have brought upon their families. Their promise of adulthood has been permanently denied.

Even if unwanted pregnancy does not result, women involved in *urfi* marriages or pre-marital sex are still required to address their lack of virginity on their wedding night. Since the mid-1990s, Egypt has been the center of hymen repair surgery in the Arab world and today Cairene gynecologists comment on the growing demand for the surgery. Ironically, as young grooms are saving for marriage, their young brides may be spending their own savings covering up sexual transgressions.

Youth Dissatisfaction By The Numbers

50 percent
Proportion of Arab population under the age of 24

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25 percent
Arab world youth unemployment rate

13 percent
Global youth unemployment rate

• • •

$43,000 USD
Average price of a wedding in Saudi Arabia in 2003

21 percent
Proportion of Saudi wedding expenses spent on lavish receptions

• • •

500,000 homes
Sitting empty in Rabat in 2001

650,000 Moroccans
Population of Rabat in 2001

• • •

12,000 cases
Of contested paternity brought to Egyptian courts in 1999

70–90 percent
Proportion of paternity cases caused by *urfi* marriages in Egypt in 1999

• • •

SOURCES: Qusti 2003; Shahine 1999; UNHSP 2003

Social Implications

Youth in the Arab world are simultaneously trapped by the physical and structural realities of poor education, unemployment, and failure of family formation, as well as by the cultural realities of societies quick to judge — even as these societies are themselves in transition and grappling with economic and political woes. The Islamic revival which inspired

the Arab world since the mid-1970s brought with it rhetoric regarding living life as a "good Muslim citizen," which included validation of the role of good mother or father and good spouse, as well as the good citizen contributing to an economically successful state. For many, "good Muslims" also aspire to take the *hajj,* or pilgrimage to Mecca (a religious requirement only if one can afford it).

We cannot ignore the cultural and religious motivations of the Arab Spring. Many Arab youth, though they do not view themselves as Islamist, conservative, or extremely religious, want to live pious lives in accordance with Islamic values and become good Islamic citizens even while living in secular states. These youth, unable to financially support families of their own, are neither able to fulfill the religious obligations of functioning adults in Islamic society, nor can they experience what they perceive as the joy of parenthood within the confines of their religion and religious community. This emotionally frustrating delay also means that youth are stuck in a state of religious pre-adulthood, unable to take on adult responsibilities at the mosque or in religious associations. Muslims who spend their entire lives paying loans for lavish weddings may struggle to fund their *hajj* later in life. Youth who feel unable to meet their religious obligations to their community because of delayed adulthood may express an understandable resentment towards their governments and societies, and seek alternative routes to publicly display their piety and religiosity.

Arab youth are unable to become adult members of the family and, as "children" well into their 20s and 30s, grow resentful that the construction of their own identities is stalled in relation to their parents, siblings, and peers. Families of young grooms will spend their entire family savings to marry off a son, while other families struggle financially for years to pay for the private tutoring necessary for children to obtain the university diplomas that fail to ensure better employment prospects. Simultaneously, youth living in their parents' homes are subject to parental rules regarding dress, spending habits, and socializing with peers, which can lead to an animosity that only grows worse as the youth ages but does not progress towards adulthood. While some Arab youth are toying with new outlooks on what adulthood should "mean" in terms of personal space and property, others prefer the idea of years of family support before marriage. In both cases, however, the pivotal issue is choice: participation in the traditional family unit or pursuit of a more individualistic worldview focusing on independence and the self. Economic constraints remove this element of choice and leave youth of all persuasions reliant on parents and family.

> **"Many youth in Tahrir Square did not have to fear losing their jobs or homes by spending days camped out at the protests because they had no jobs to be absent from, and no spouses or houses of their own to return to."**

Many youth involved in the demonstrations of the Arab Spring feel that their governments have failed to provide deserved opportunity (Mothana 2011). Many feel betrayed, and that their loyalty, patriotism, and nationalism was not rewarded. Most lack any forum in which to address these social and economic issues with their governments, leaving them feeling politically excluded and ignored. Among its many motivations, the Arab Spring was a call to governments to provide opportunity and facilitate adulthood. If youth are not provided the social, political, and economic space to become adults, they will seek a way to end their pre-adulthood liminal phase on their own, even if that means becoming militant or participating in massive peaceful demonstrations.

Angry and with little else to do, many unemployed, over-educated and single youth turn to peaceful protest — or worse, to militancy — and represent a legitimate threat to the security of Arab regimes. After all, in Tunisia "of the 700,000 officially reckoned to be jobless in a population of 10.6m, some 170,000 are graduates — the angriest part of a populace enraged by the inequities and corruption that helped spark the revolution against Mr. Ben Ali" (Economist 2011). Many youth in Tahrir Square did not have to fear losing their jobs or homes by spending days camped out at the protests because they had no jobs to be absent from, and no spouses or houses of their own to return to. Trapped in seemingly permanent pre-adulthood, youth blame the regimes that have placed too many roadblocks in their path to maturity and societal acceptance. Ultimately, the Arab Spring was a political manifestation of cultural frustration.

Resentment *of* The Arab Spring

A final societal issue is worth noting: youth frustration may be a *consequence* of the Arab Spring as well as a cause. The causes of the Arab Spring were broader and more culturally, politically, and economically entrenched in the lives of Arab youth than one leader or figurehead. Ousting the leader will only temporarily lessen tensions. Far more significant impacts will require real changes in the bureaucratic and governmental structures of Arab states in terms of privatization of certain industries, reorganization and implementation of new education policy, job creation, housing market control, and democratic progress. For many Arab youth, the revolutions of 2011 will become the defining event of their early lives, particularly for the unemployed and single youth for whom any other form of adulthood-affirmation is missing or delayed. Youth who successfully win the right to free and fair elections but still cannot earn a living or start a family will not be satisfied with the long-term results of the Arab Spring.

So what happens if the promise of the Arab Spring is a lie? In Tunisia, the ousting of Ben Ali appears to have opened the door to a democratic future, provided the economy can recover (Economist 2011). Moroccans appear momentarily placated by constitutional reforms and a love of their king. But these are the "success" stories. Egyptians have begun looking nervously at their military to organize elections, even while economic conditions fail to improve. Libyans face the task of building a modern nation state from scratch, as Gaddafi's Libya has been such a mess of nepotism, tribalism, and chaos that many in Libya have never even known a legitimate government or economy. Syrians eager to experience their own regime change are only left with a steeply rising death toll. And in Bahrain, genuine demands against sectarian rule and the violence inflicted by the monarchy to silence dissent have both been markedly and deliberately ignored by the international community. Even those youth who put their lives on the line in Tahrir Square or Benghazi may not be able to organize or shape future expressions of youth frustration as each subsequent revolution fails to bring the opportunity or hope that is promised.

The Arab Future

The Arab Spring is over, but incomplete. The social, political, and economic issues that caused it have yet to be addressed. Nowhere else in the world do youth have such a difficult time becoming adults. The frustration that motivated youth to enter the streets—the desire for adult status and the failure of states to provide the opportunities necessary for youth to escape the pre-adulthood trap—must be addressed by any government hoping to avoid

future demonstrations and revolutions. The political costs are high; educated, single, and empty-handed, Arab youth have little to lose and many demands. Lacking outlets for political participation, they filled streets across the Arab world to demand significant reorganization of their governments and even oust their countries' regimes.

These problems so concerned Arab youth that they demanded opportunity in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere and refused to leave the streets until they forced change. The broken promise of adulthood can no longer be ignored — the youth of Cairo, Tunis, Tripoli, and throughout the Arab world have grown tired of waiting for adult status. As their numbers continue to grow, they will constitute a force of great potential change in the world.

Improving the youth situation in the Arab world is necessary for regional and global stability. Problems such as significant youth demographic bulges and the rising cost of marriage are not unique to the Arab world, but are especially relevant there. Only in the Arab world is the alienation of youth so powerful along every possible avenue of adulthood-attainment. The future stability of the region requires the creation of opportunities that reintegrate youth into Arab economies, religious communities, and social networks through the achievement of adult status. ●

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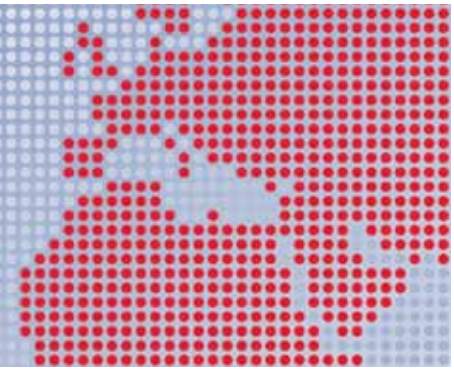

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