Boston University The Frederick S. Pardee Center
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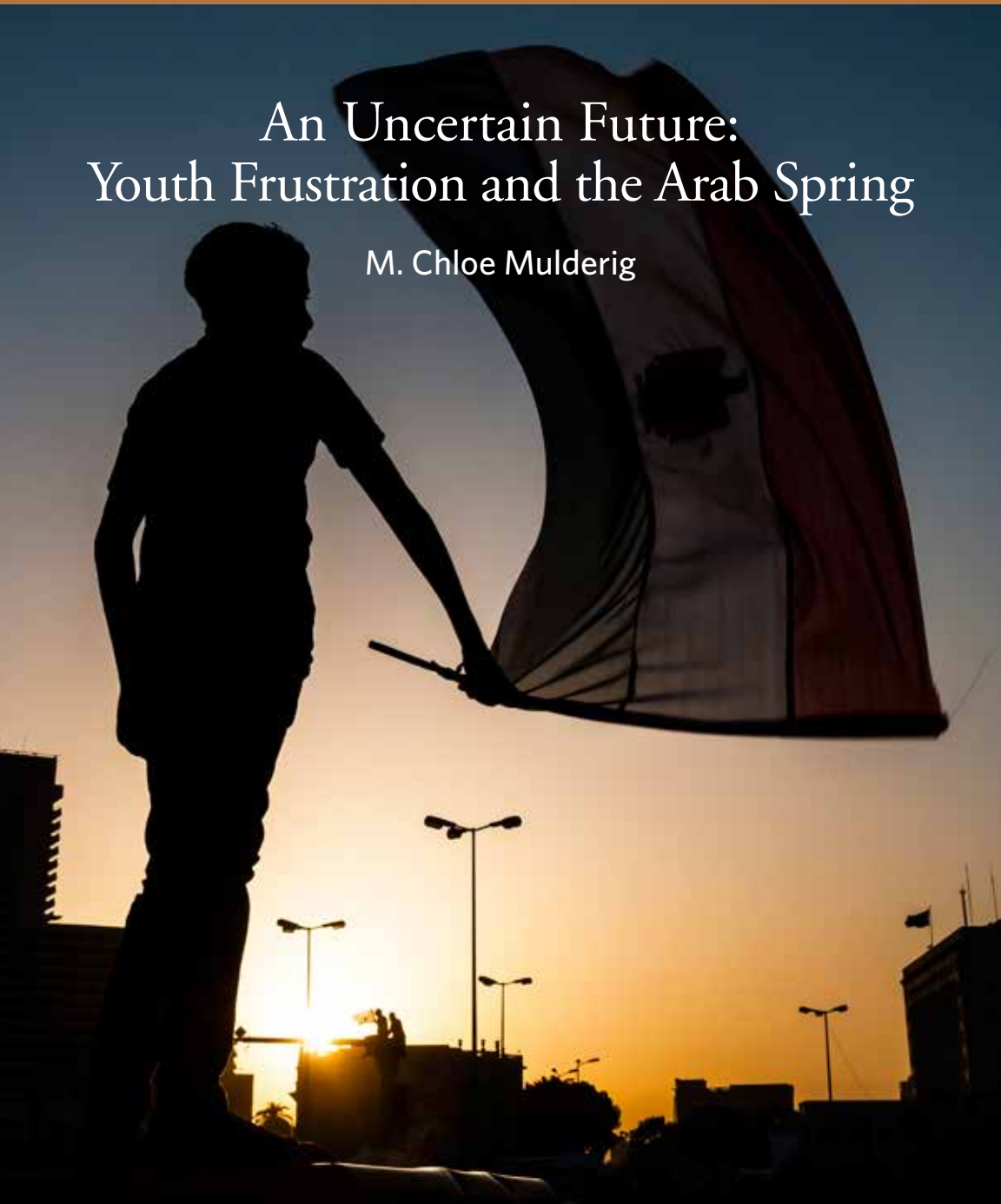
An Uncertain Future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring

M. Chloe Mulderig



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The Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future
Boston University
Pardee House
67 Bay State Road
Boston, Massachusetts 02215
Tel: +1 617-358-4000 Fax: +1 617-358-4001
www.bu.edu/pardee
Email: pardee@bu.edu

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An Uncertain Future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring

M. Chloe Mulderig

Abstract

Many scholars have focused on the political factors (in particular, the desire for regime change and democratization) as central motivations for the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011. However, the Arab world is currently experiencing massive demographic crises, and policy makers must acknowledge the cultural pressures that have left this young generation trapped in a pre-adulthood phase of social status that prevents them from becoming fully engaged with Arab society. The inability of youth to access the opportunities promised in the social contract of adulthood—including quality education, viable employment, and marriage and family formation—has led to massive resentment motivating youth to actively seek change within their country and region. Countries which do not begin to address the cultural sources of youth frustration will find themselves vulnerable to continued unrest long after the Arab Spring dissipates, while the current youth generation runs the risk of becoming socially displaced in a region experiencing rapid economic and cultural development.

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Mohammed Bouazizi, the young street vendor who set himself ablaze in public in late 2010, did not intend to start a revolution in Tunisia. He certainly could not have foreseen that he would motivate the peoples of the Arab world[1] to seek social change in the collection of demonstrations, rebellions, and armed conflicts stretching from Morocco to the Gulf that the international community has dubbed the "Arab Spring." Bouazizi's actions resonated around the world precisely because Bouazizi personified a huge segment of the population that would become the force behind the demonstrations of the Arab Spring: young, single, un- or under-employed, desperate, and increasingly enraged at their governments for ignoring these problems. Bouazizi did not inspire the Arab Spring because he was special; he inspired demonstrations because his situation was not unique at all.

While revolutions are most often viewed as rebellion against a specific political regime, youth participation in the Arab Spring should be examined as an expression of a powerful socio-cultural frustration: the inability of youth to achieve adulthood, held back by governments and markets that stall youth engagement. Throughout the West, the Arab Spring has been portrayed as a struggle between the masses seeking democratic reform and stagnant regimes looking to perpetuate authoritarianism. However, "the vast majority of protestors knew nothing of political ideology. They were brought into the streets, not by a burning desire for free and fair elections, but by the dire economic circumstances in which they lived" (Bradley 2012:201). Arab Spring demonstrations were an opportunity for citizens to demand the fulfillment of the social contracts made with their autocratic leaders, and should be viewed as not only a political struggle, but also an economic and cultural struggle. The most basic of societal contracts—that children will one day grow up, begin

The most basic of societal contracts—that children will one day grow up, begin to contribute productively to society, and then raise families of their own—has been broken for an entire generation of youth in the Arab world trapped in a liminal period often referred to as "waithood."

1. For the purposes of this paper, the "Arab world" consists of the nations of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, as well as the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

to contribute productively to society, and then raise families of their own—has been broken for an entire generation of youth in the Arab world trapped in a liminal period often referred to as "waithood." In this anthropological study, based on ethnographic fieldwork and on-the-ground research in Morocco throughout 2011 and 2012, I argue that the socio-cultural motivations and frustrations expressed by Arab youth were the underlying cause of the regional unrest, and these social and economic problems will remain a hindrance to legitimate democratic reform unless they are addressed.

The Arab Spring has been notable because of the wide variety of participants found in each country; still, the most common face seen at demonstrations was that of the young Arab, aged 15–24. Certainly, members of the middle-class and the economic elite participated in the demonstrations, and Arabs of all age-levels fought for their dignity in the face of autocratic repression. Once military or police forces were used to suppress protestors, there is no doubt that many more joined protests to fight for stability and safety in their cities; after all, liberation and revolution are on-going processes. And while this study proposes that the overarching socio-cultural, economic, and political problems causing youth frustration can be found throughout the Arab world, it claims neither that the situation on the ground is the same in any two countries, nor that youth were the only participants or their concerns the only relevant demands.

Ultimately, however, I argue that the contagion of the Arab Spring revolutions was largely caused by the realization of 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. In addition, as the Arab Spring melted away in a summer of discontent, blood, and uncertainty, the deeply entrenched socio-economic problems that caused Arab youth frustration did not simply disappear with the overthrow of a given dictator. The success of various states in the region in the longer-term future will depend on a coherent strategy to improve education, promote the private sector and increase employment opportunities, and assist young Arabs in affording the marriages necessary for youth to embrace adult social status in the Arab world. The survival of any democratic government spawned by the Arab

Spring will require the participation of youth, as well as policies and programs that address the concerns of youth in both the short- and long-term.

THE INITIAL TRAPS: THE YOUTH BULGE AND ARAB UNEMPLOYMENT

The Arab world has been facing a demographic trap for nearly three decades, and the worst generational demographic imbalances are, for many Arab countries, yet to come. The vast majority of population growth in the Arab world was caused by high birth rates and prolonged life spans, as opposed to any kind of immigration into the region. The resulting cadre of youth are living longer, healthier lives and are seeking a higher quality of living, including accountability from their governments, more consumer options, and respect for human rights. The Arab Spring could not have occurred without the ideological and numerical push of a huge mass of angry youth.

These demographic transitions have led to unbalanced societies in terms of age cohorts, and by 2011 many of these young cohorts had "come of age" and were seeking the benefits of adulthood. Youth under the age of 24 account for just over half of the population of the Arab world.[2] The cohort that is now coming of age across the Arab world, ages 15–24, accounts for roughly 20 percent of the regional population (Middle East Youth Initiative 2009; U.S. Census Bureau 2011). One out of every five Arabs is seeking to finish schooling, find a job, and get married, while another 30 percent of the population are children, and will want their opportunities when their times come.

Thus, when governments strive to improve educational access to all, they are not only looking to increase opportunities for women and those in rural areas, but these governments also need to create more openings at schools in absolute terms. The same applies for the job market. In the Arab world in particular, where the education and job markets have only recently embraced participation by women, the absolute increase in opportunities needed is staggering. The end of this youth bulge trend, for

2. All demographic information used in this report was collected by national and international organizations before the beginning of the Arab Spring. New demographic information, which takes into account deaths and emigration due to violence in 2011–2012, was not available at time of publication. It is likely that Syria and Libya in particular will have smaller youth bulges after the Arab Spring due to civil war and regime suppression.

most states of the Arab world, will not occur until 2030 or, for states like Iraq, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, and Yemen that are further delayed in their youth bulges, 2050 (World Bank/IBRD 2008:98). Even when states reach 100 percent gross enrollment rate in primary and secondary schooling, as most are striving for, they will need to continue increasing educational funding as the absolute number of youth continues to rise for the next half century. Years after the Arab Spring has become a memory, the Arab world will still face the central challenge causing unrest and dissatisfaction: a massive youth, seeking to find its place in society and its own sense of identity. For most youth of the world, identity formation begins with the family, schooling, and the first job, when necessary skills and ideas are imparted to the next generation.

Arab and Jobless

Unemployment and underemployment are also debilitating problems in the Arab world. According to the ILO Global Employment Trends 2011 Report, the Middle East and North Africa are the two regions with the worst rates of unemployment in 2010, especially amongst youth (ILO 2011a:48). At 10.3 percent in 2010, the unemployment rate in the Arab world has been the highest of any region on the globe for many years (ILO 2011a). There is also massive disparity in unemployment rates within the Arab world, with Yemen suffering from 35 percent unemployment while Qatar only experiences half a percent unemployment.

Youth unemployment in the Arab world is consistently higher than youth unemployment rates of other regions.

Youth unemployment in the Arab world is consistently higher than youth unemployment rates of other regions. Youth unemployment in the region ranges from Yemen on the high end with 50 percent youth unemployment, to the United Arab Emirates at the low end with 12.1 percent; in all cases, the percentage of Arab youth willing but unable to find work is significantly higher than anywhere else in the world. According to the United Nations Development Program and the League of Arab States, nations of the Arab world collectively will need to create roughly 51 million jobs by 2020 to meet demand for jobs for the currently unemployed

and the youth who will be entering the job market soon (Abdel-Gadir and Abu-Ismail 2009:32–33; UNDP 2009:109).

In addition, the Arab world suffers from low participation rates, meaning that fewer members of society who *could be* working actually *are* working. The employment-to-population ratio of the Arab world is roughly 45 percent, so that more Arabs of productive age are *not* in the work force than *are* in the work force (Abdih 2011). Across the Arab world, this low participation rate means that many, including youth, are choosing to avoid employment all together, living with the support of family or remittances from abroad. Many others choose to be underemployed or work "off-the-books" in the gray-market economy. In the Arab world in particular, this low participation rate is further skewed by gender, with less than 30 percent of working age women participating in the job market (ILO 2011a:52). Rates of Arab female engagement within the work force are the lowest in the world. All discussions of unemployment, and especially youth unemployment, should be viewed through the lens of work force participation—unemployment rates only track those who are willingly looking for employment but cannot find it, and do not include the half of the Arab population, and the two-thirds of the female population, who have given up seeking employment or never sought work at all.

One of the main causes of unemployment and underemployment in the Arab world has been the poor application of neo-liberal economic policies by Arab regimes incapable of or disinterested in building strong economies. This included a decrease of the role that public sector employment would play in the economy of a state and a general shrinking of the governmental bureaucracy with the goal of elevating the private sector. In the Arab world, however, these policies have more accurately led to unprecedented cronyism, a decrease in the number of public sector jobs and a growing mistrust of the private sector that has not grown to replace lost governmental jobs (e4e 2011). This has led to increases in unemployment, but not to a corresponding rejection of public sector jobs, which are still too highly prized amongst Arab workers. Public sector jobs still offer more money, security, and benefits, even if they are harder to find (Kabbani 2009). For example, many

of my informants[3] in Morocco stress the importance of public sector jobs in inserting the worker into the governmental "club," allowing nepotistic benefits like lower property taxes and faster processing of passport requests. Thus, many Arabs, young and old, prioritize public sector jobs even when they are non-existent or unavailable, which leads many to wait rather than take private sector employment, with the hopes that a public sector job will materialize in the future.

Unemployment is a result of a failure of the job market to offer sufficient numbers of jobs in multiple sectors, as well as a failure of the state to provide the education and training necessary to succeed in a wide variety of industries and fields. In most parts of the world, the first step toward a secure career is quality education. The pivotal social sphere of education is the first place that Arab governments fail their youth in assisting the transition to adulthood, and the failure of Arab education sets the stage for an entrapment in a liminal pre-adulthood existence.

A FAILING MARK FOR ARAB EDUCATION

With the threat of youth bulges looming on the horizon, many Arab states launched massive educational reforms throughout the 1970s and 1980s that 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 (UNDP 2002:52). Increasing investment by Arab governments has lead to education accounting for more than five percent of GDP in all Arab countries (except Syria) which have seen popular revolution, public demonstrations, or political unrest (UNESCO/EFA 2009). Many countries in the Arab world are allocating more than 15 percent of their government spending on educational programs (World Bank/IBRD 2008:104). Primary education is slowly becoming more common in the region, and those in rural areas in particular have seen a marked increase in access to adolescent schooling and post-secondary education. Illiteracy

3. Although the term "informant" has specific connotations in the intelligence field, it is used in this paper solely in the anthropological context to refer impartially to subjects interviewed and studied during ethnographic research.

rates have dropped significantly within the last generation (Rugh 2002). The international community has applauded the Arab world for its rapid improvement in women's access to education, though the gender gap is not closed yet. Arab educational systems, much like their other developing world counterparts, have been struggling with high dropout and repetition rates (UNESCO/EFA 2005), but states have been actively working to reduce these rates, particularly in cases where rates are the highest among the rural and lower-class.

Still, the international community has perhaps been too quick to applaud the Arab world for its rapid improvements in educational access: Morocco still boasts nearly 40 percent illiteracy, while in Jordan and many other states secondary education has become the almost exclusive realm of middle and upper-class youth (Dhillon, Dyer and Yousef 2010). Accountability is a central and largely unaddressed concern (UNDP 2002; UNESCO/EFA 2005). Tears of frustration streaming down her face, one young Moroccan I spoke with provided a clear analysis of her educational experience: "Education in Morocco is worth zero. I know that, all my classmates know that. Even our parents know. But what are we to do?" While nearly all Arab youth have access to at least the beginnings of a full education, the actual value of what they are receiving has not yet reached international expectations.

When Arab youth are tested on skills and knowledge gained during their education, the progress of education in the Arab world is revealed to be a mirage. Students in the Arab world score significantly lower on international standardized educational testing, meaning that the average Arab student has gained less from their time in schooling than youth in other countries. Arab students from Morocco to the Gulf score lower than average in both math and science on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), with many countries' median student scoring at or below the low benchmark and none scoring at the international average (Dhillon, Dyer and Yousef 2010:19; Institute of Education Sciences 2011). According to the 2005 Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey, only 49.7 percent of girls graduating from the state-required minimum years of schooling (aged 15 or older) could pass a basic literacy test (Assaad and Barsoum 2007). The World Bank argued in 2008 that this startling gap between the improve-

ment in the *quantity* of education in the Arab world, without a corresponding improvement in the *quality* of education, has lead to stalled economic growth in much of the region (World Bank/IBRD 2008). Arab students do not have the ability to compete on an international level, and also lack the basic mathematical and communications skills needed to work in almost any non-menial-labor position available (UNDP 2002).

In addition to poor performance on international standardized testing, many youth in the Arab world are experiencing a skills mismatch that has exacerbated unemployment stresses. Education in much of the Arab world still focuses on the rote memorization techniques honed during centuries of Qur'anic *madrasa* education. Numerous anthropologists and other social scientists working in the Arab world today observe pedagogical problems in Arab classrooms: students spend hours copying numbers and words off of blackboards, with eyes buried in textbooks or focused on a sole teacher addressing the entire class in oral repetitions of lists of facts (Brown 2003; Rugh 2002; Watkins 2011; World Bank/IBRD 2008). Creative or original activities, group work, debate, and expression of opinion are rare. The needs of individual students are almost completely ignored.

Social Confusion about Skills Needed

There is still a strong societal belief across the Arab world that the best quality employment requires a university degree, and many families push children into university programs even if students failed to obtain basic problem-solving and independent-thinking skills. This is because "access to universities . . . is highly dependent on passing national tests which are designed primarily to measure the acquisition of facts and knowledge through rote memorization rather than critical and independent thinking" (Dhillon and Salehi-Isfahani 2008:6). The Education for Employment Initiative found that, even while businesses are looking for workers with problem-solving and other skills, youth still incorrectly believe that the rote memorization of language and computer skills are most

Universities must reorient their enrollment requirements to encourage the teaching of critical-thinking skills as opposed to the regurgitation of facts gained through rote memorization.

important in finding a new job (e4e 2011; see also Rugh 2002). Universities must reorient their enrollment requirements to encourage the teaching of critical-thinking skills as opposed to the regurgitation of facts gained through rote memorization.

Students are choosing to major in the fields of the humanities and social sciences during higher education, the disciplines most favored by public sector employment but also most overpopulated (Al Masah Research 2011; World Bank/IBRD 2008). Many states, including Egypt and Morocco, limit the number of students focusing on scientific, technical, and engineering studies, crippling the next generations' ability to pursue emerging industries like information technology, biomedical technology, and various new fields of engineering. It should be noted with sad irony that the only two countries in the Arab world that can boast over 10 percent of their students obtaining degrees in medicine and medical sciences are Libya and Syria, with 17 percent and 11.5 percent respectively (World Bank/IBRD 2008:21). These will also be the two countries that will most desperately need a new generation of doctors to cope with the massive civilian casualties each nation faced in their Arab Spring.

Highly Educated and Unemployable

The combination of an overemphasis on public sector employment and a dramatic skills mismatch puts the Arab world in a unique conundrum: the more education one has in the Arab world, the *less* likely he or she 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 (secondary school degree), and 61.2 percent for those with a university diploma or better (Boudarbat and Ajbilou 2007). In Jordan, where education has been the pet project of Her Majesty Queen Rania al Abdullah, 53 percent of unemployed youth have a university degree or better (ETF 2005). There is thus massive frustration because youth receive the same general message in the Arab world as they do around the globe: if you get more education, you will have more opportunity, and you will get a better job. But for many Arab youth, that message is a blatant lie.

Creating a cohort of over-educated and unemployed youth in the Arab world has led to the formation of unions, which can present a real threat to regime security. In Morocco, I attended a number of demonstrations organized by the Association National des Diplomés Chômeurs, a union of university-degree-holding unemployed youth that have been active for over a decade. This union became one of the major pools of support for the troubled "20 February" movement, Morocco's only real source of discontent during the Arab Spring. The group is particularly well-known for appearing at government demonstrations brandishing their university diplomas and waving them angrily at government officials who attempt to quell the protest. Similar groups exist elsewhere in the Arab world, and are particularly active in Egypt and Tunisia.

If educational systems in the Arab world train students to barely pass exams oriented toward public sector work, even as public sector jobs are disappearing, then what role does the private sector have in bridging the gap between education and youth employment? The answer is unclear. The 2010/2011 ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey found that more than half of the youth in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states[4] would prefer to work in the public sector, but in the non-GCC countries of the Arab world, nearly two-thirds of youth are more interested in private sector employment, a sign that opinions may be changing and youth are becoming increasingly interested in private sector opportunities (ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller 2011). Internationally, governments from Morocco to the Gulf (as with elsewhere in the developing world) have been actively encouraging private sector investment and the growth of private sector employment in their respective countries for decades. But neo-liberal economic policies, along with a history of Arab Socialism, have made many in the Arab world suspicious of the private sector, corporations, and Western-backed transnational companies. The resulting state policies that regulate employment in the private sector are harsh and heavily discourage discretionary layoffs. This in turn discourages the private sector from hiring new workers and prevents

4. The reader is reminded that the GCC did not yet include the non-Gulf countries of Morocco or Jordan at the time of the 2010/2011 ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey. The invitation of Morocco and Jordan to the GCC was an Arab Spring development that, while relevant to analysis of the events of 2011, is not pertinent to the focus of this report.

the private sector from rewarding workers based on skills or output (Abdih 2011; World Bank/IBRD 2008). Until these labor laws are revised, and private sector businesses are able to hire and fire based on skills and performance, the private sector will remain feeble in the Arab world and leave youth with few employment opportunities.

As a result, many youth in the Arab world are finding employment in the informal sector or black market, which often has both short- and longer-term consequences. Jobs in the informal sector are often seasonal or short-term, and provide little in terms of marketable skills that can be leveraged when looking for better employment. These positions rarely include contracts and allow little to no legal recourse for employees, a particularly dangerous situation for young female workers. In addition to instability, informal sector jobs are often less enjoyable and provide little worker satisfaction, a major factor affecting youth frustration in the Arab world for which there is yet little data collected (Assaad, Binzel and Gadallah 2010). Exacerbating these realities, most youth who get their first job in the informal sector have little chance of leaving the informal sector for later employment; in Egypt, for example, only 11 percent of those whose first job is in the informal sector are subsequently able to find employment in the formal sector (Assaad, Binzel and Gadallah 2010).

The result is a failure of education in the eyes of the youth for whom numerous "opportunities" for more schooling have not equaled opportunities for employment. For many, the objective of education is to gain the skills and expertise necessary to secure long-term employment. The end result is a feeling that one has "put in his time" and is entitled to, at the least, 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 in progressing toward financial security. The "silver bullet" of education becomes a bitter pill to swallow when youth are more likely to secure employment if they do not pursue secondary education, even as governments, eager for international financial support, encourage youth to enroll and graduate. The implications of this frustration are obvious; as Brookings Institute analysts 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). Thus, while the myth of the well-educated youth gained popularity throughout the West during news coverage of Egypt's revolution and other Arab Spring demonstrations, this picture was not quite accurate: Arab youth are *over-educated*, not *well-educated*, and their stalled status reminds them of this difference daily.

For millions of youth across the Arab world, years of schooling have failed to provide economic opportunities. Even those able to find work in the informal sector are struggling to make enough money to afford the basics of life, especially since the 2008 global recession has increased the price of food, cooking oil, fuel, and other necessities. But many youth are not only looking for work to earn a living wage; they must also begin saving money for the future. Young men in particular are pressured to save up significant sums of money, because they will need to finance the next step of the transition out of the pre-adulthood phase: marriage and the formation of a new family.

THE FAILURE OF FAMILY FORMATION

Missing Out on Marriage

Why is marriage such a pivotal concern for youth within the Arab world? Delaying marriage in the Islamic Arab world has a physical frustration attached: because sexual intercourse before marriage or outside of marriage is considered forbidden, delaying marriage can also delay the seeking of 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). Extra-marital intercourse, known as *zina*, is prohibited in the Qur'an and the hadith, and centuries of Islamic jurisprudence has emphasized the value of virginity before marriage for both sexes (though more so for women). Neither Islam, nor Arab culture, is unique in this perspective. But in the Islamic world, pre-marital and especially feminine virginity is emphasized in popular discourse and Islamist politics alike, and changing sexual norms are some of the most controversial topics within the Islamic world today. The public debate is, in part, because of changes in dress—particularly the emergence of the *muhajababe* (Stratton 2006), the hijab-wearing young Muslim

woman in tight or revealing Western fashions—and changes in the public mixing between genders at universities and the workplace.

Debate regarding marriage and sexuality is also heated because, in the Arab world, marriage is not only a contract between two individuals; it is a social contract with society that those individuals will build a family unit and contribute to the next generation. 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, and early marriage among young women has fallen more dramatically than anywhere else in the globe" (2008:76). If marriage is the end of the adolescent liminal phase, then delay of marriage is not only a delay in starting a family, but also a delay in obtaining social acceptance and fulfillment of the socio-religious adult role for the individual. Thus, for most youth in the Arab world, marriage and raising a family are non-negotiable goals on the life course. Few choose not to marry, and prolonged "singlehood" is usually viewed by Arab society with either distrust or pity. Overwhelmingly, the motivation for delaying or rejecting marriage is financial, creating a situation in which youth desiring to marry simply have to wait until they (and their families) have saved enough money to afford a wedding (Rashad et. al. 2005; Singerman 2008).

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Marriage does not come cheap in the Arab world. Singerman (2007), who has thoroughly explored the intersection of the economic and cultural costs and benefits of marriage in the Arab world, 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, according to the 2006 Egyptian Labor Market Panel Survey (Singerman 2007). In Saudi Arabia, marriage costs in 2003 were estimated to be

roughly SR165,000 (USD $43,000), with just over 21 percent of that cost going toward the lavish and social-status-oriented celebrations and receptions (Qusti 2003).

The hidden expense of dowry compounds this rise in marriage costs. In the Arab world, a dowry passes from groom to bride, and if he initiates a divorce, she will be able to keep the dowry as payment. The 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 through horizontal associations, these marriages were backed with the social reassurances that both sides would help the young couple work through their problems and lead a successful marriage. Marriage was a social contract that unified groups and families, and thus was unlikely to end in divorce. But as the nature of marriage changes, and more youth marry out of love and desire, there has been an increase in divorce rates and dowry has become a major deterrent for divorce.

The result has been skyrocketing dowry costs. For example, in Yemen, dowry costs have risen from USD $200 to upwards of USD $20,000 within the last generation (Almasmari 2006). One of my favorite informants, a young Moroccan man named Saleh, was finally able in the spring of 2012 to marry a neighbor he had loved since childhood. Making less than USD $25 a week and saving for almost a decade, he was only able to afford the USD $2,200 dowry by paying half up front and agreeing to house his parents-in-law for the remainder of their lives. For youth unwilling or unable to make such sacrifices, dowry can be a financial requirement that makes marriage inaccessible.

This egregiously high cost is negotiated between parties and is not included in many analysts' calculation of "marriage costs," even though dowry prices dramatically affect a young man's ability to put together the money needed for a marriage. Thus, the above statistics on the high cost of marriage are actually hiding part of the skyrocketing price—in addition to the rising cost of marriage, the rising cost of dowry makes becoming an adult a very costly enterprise. While a number of countries are experiencing similar rising costs of marriage—China and India are the most notable examples—the Arab world has experienced even more dramatic and exaggerated price increases. The nature of dowry in Arab culture has combined with changing defini-

tions of who is an acceptable spouse, leading to the replacement of social ties with economic ties that cannot be easily borne.

A Connected Concern: The Arab Housing Crisis

One of the most frustrating challenges for youth preparing for marriage is the rising cost of housing. In the Arab world, the groom is usually expected to purchase the couple's first home at the time of the wedding, or put down a significant amount of money toward a long-term apartment rental. In Egypt, housing costs contribute a third of wedding costs (another third going toward furniture to fill the new home) (Singerman 2007). For previous generations, living in extended families under one roof was a normal part of the life course, particularly in the urban environment. Youth, however, have been raised on television and internet images from both the West and media powerhouses like Egypt and Turkey that portray the lives of singles and pre-parenthood couples in a different way. These new images show youth living on their own in urban apartments within the same neighborhood or city as their parents, able to experience the independence of living alone while still having close access to their parents' home and the security of the extended family. This ideal is the goal of many young couples, and as a result, the cost of "starter" homes and apartments is calculated into marriage costs. Increases in housing costs and unavailability of suitable housing both delay the marriage process for youth. The inability to find suitable housing also delays the formation of adult identities for youth, as they fail to create their own adult homes. According to the 2010/2011 ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey, unemployment and the rising cost of living—including housing—are the top concerns for young Arabs.

The Arab world is experiencing a minor housing crisis, brought on by a combination of misdirected development projects and misguided rent control.

The Arab world is experiencing a minor housing crisis, brought on by a combination of misdirected development projects and misguided rent control. In most urban centers across the Arab world, affordable housing is a rarity, but according to the World Bank, "the affordability problem does not appear to be driven by scarcity as a whole, but it is more likely that

scarcity exists in certain segments of the housing market (e.g. low-income housing)" (World Bank 2005:10). While foreign (particularly Emirati and Saudi) investment has allowed for a number of new housing projects across the Arab world, these modern gated communities are oriented toward the upper-class and foreign clientele, resulting in an over-supply of high-cost housing. Little of the growing production of housing has been oriented toward the lower end of the housing market. Yet youth are rarely interested in purchasing an upper-class condo or house as their first home, particularly when they do not yet have the children to fill it.

Rent control, which discourages private sector housing development, is exacerbating these problems. Most Arab states practice some form of government-mandated "second-generation" rent control, under which landlords can only set rents at the beginning of the lease period and governmental indexes determine the small increases in rent allowed (World Bank 2005). This kind of rent control rewards current renters, but punishes new renters by forcing landlords to set high initial rents and deterring landlords from engaging in formal leasing. Rent control is coupled in most Arab states with strict rental laws that heavily favor the renter, making it difficult to expel bad tenants. Landlords in the private sector thus have little motivation to take on new tenants, improve or maintain units, or create formal rental contracts. This all but destroys the formal rental market, which would be the most desirable market for single youths and young couples because of the security provided by legal rental agreements.

The result is that housing prices across the board have risen in the past decade, and there has been an increase in informal housing. This may include: housing not currently meeting government standards; apartments rented through informal and non-contractual agreements; the "renting" of family-owned assets to distant relatives moving into new urban settings; and, in extreme circumstances, the creation of slums. This informal market offers little security in the short or long term to youth, particularly those who move from rural to urban environments looking for work. Youth have few options for lower-class housing as many viable apartment options are deliberately left vacant by landlords disinterested in entering a poor formal housing market, and starting rents are either egregiously high or found in

the informal sector where renters have no security or legal recourse (Middle East Youth Initiative 2009). 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 the economic realities of their countries do not allow them to find housing and thus embrace the cultural change they are seeking. The nexus of sexual desire, pious aspirations, individual morality and responsibility, and societal emphasis on family formation as a requirement of adulthood is already a difficult terrain for youth to traverse. Frustration thus occurs when youth are forced to delay culmination of this phase of the life course because of a financial calculus at the national and international level that does not provide them with the opportunities necessary to make a savable wage.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS: CULTURAL CHANGE, FRUSTRATION, AND POLITICAL REVOLUTION

The problems and trends discussed here should be the subject of study for business leaders, policymakers, political authorities, and academics alike interested in the cultural foundations of youth discontent in the Arab world; more empirical research is needed to determine the nature of these challenges in each country's unique circumstances. However, conclusions about the cultural impacts of ensnarement in the pre-adulthood phase can be explored within the context of the Arab Spring and applied to subsequent political efforts within each state to address the concerns presented by angry youth.

Impacts of the Failure of Attaining Adulthood

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. Youth are struggling to create a coherent and unique sense of identity, while experiencing symbolic rejection (Bennani-Chraibi 2000; Singerman 2007) from their societies. The Islamic revival which inspired the Arab world since the mid-1970s brought with it rhetoric regarding living life as a "good Muslim citizen," a discourse which included

validation of the role of good mother or father and good spouse, as well as a good citizen contributing to an economically successful state. In addition, for many, "good Muslims" have the financial ability to donate *zakat* (similar to the concept of alms) to the poor of the community; *zakat*, as one of the pillars of Islam, is a required cost of living piously. For others, "good Muslims" aspire to another of the pillars of Islam: taking the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, a requirement only if one can afford it.

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, which for them will mean becoming a good Islamic citizen even while living in secular states. These youth, unable to financially support families of their own, are neither able to fulfill their religious obligation to be 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. Muslims who spend their entire lives paying loans for lavish weddings may struggle to fund their trip for the *hajj* later in life. Youth may struggle to contribute *zakat* to their community, losing the opportunity to gain social status and the associational ties that can be made by working with Islamic charities. In addition to being emotionally frustrating, this 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. Youth who feel unable to meet their religious obligations to their community because of delayed adulthood may express an understandable resentment toward their governments and societies.

Resentment of the family and frustration with familial authority structures are both a cause and a consequence of the frustration youth feel toward their failed transition to adulthood.

Resentment of the family and frustration with familial authority structures are both a cause and a consequence of the frustration youth feel toward their failed transition to adulthood. The family unit is the foundation of the organization of Arab societies, and strong family values are combined with a genuine sense of wanting to maintain meaningful bonds in the family. Arab youth are

increasingly drawn to more liberal ideas of personal autonomy, and many are torn between the desire to uphold the traditional value of familial cohesiveness, or strike out on their own both physically and psychologically. Still, according to the ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey, Arab youth believe that parents and family continue to be the most influential forces in their outlook on the world (ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller 2011). 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: choosing to participate in the traditional family unit, and/or choosing to pursue a more individualistic worldview focusing on independence and the self. The economic constraints, particularly on marriage, remove the element of choice and leave youth of all persuasions reliant on their parents and family.

These 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. The result is that "the socioeconomic functions of the family—prolonged financial support, a social network and other benefits of closeness—although diminished by the increased importance of the state and the modernization of the economy, have been revived. The construction of the subject has progressed far enough for any dependence to be a source of resentment" (Bennani-Chraibi 2000:147). 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 (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi 2007; World Bank/IBRD 2008). Simultaneously, youth living in their parents' homes are subject to their 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 toward adulthood. Living with one's parents, in the Arab world as with elsewhere, comes with some strings attached.

Resentment and the Arab Spring

As 2011 and 2012 proceeded, romantic notions of pan-Arab unity and democratization heralded by eager participants dissolved when it became

clear that little actual change would occur in the region. The momentum of a bloodless dismissal of Tunisia's Ben Ali led to a military coup and Islamist takeover in Egypt that was all but barely clothed in the appearance of popular revolution. The Moroccan revolution was easily co-opted by a well-loved king. These three cases turned out to be the "successes," though in all three countries, Islamists quickly and easily filled the vacuums of power made available. But the Arab Spring melted into a summer of discontent as Libyan rebels and pro-Gaddafi forces battled under the shadows of NATO aircraft and Yemen's already weak state fell into violence and chaos. Saudi Arabia rolled tanks into Bahrain to stop protests there in a Wahhabi counterrevolution against growing Shi'i interests, quashing any rumors of a pan-Arab sentiment. The Kuwaiti government wrote direct checks to citizens and awarded Kuwaitis with 14 months of free food (Arab News 2011), which many Kuwaitis viewed as a bribe to delay protests. Jordan, which has largely remained quiet under the moderate hand of King Abdullah, faced its largest demonstrations to date in October of 2012. Even as this paper goes to print, the international community is struggling to agree on a response to Syrian violence perpetrated by the government against its own people.

For many youth in the Arab world, the Arab Spring was a call to governments to provide opportunity, and allow youth to become adults; if these youth are not given 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.

Many of the youth involved in the protests and demonstrations of the Arab Spring feel that their governments have not provided them with the opportunities they deserve. Their patriotism and nationalism have left many feeling betrayed and that their loyalty has not been rewarded. Most lack any forum in which to work on these social and economic issues with the government, leaving youth feeling politically excluded and ignored. For many youth in the Arab world, the Arab Spring was a call to governments to provide opportunity, and allow youth to become adults; if these youth are not given 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, highly 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). Youth in Tahrir Square did not have to fear losing their jobs or homes by spending days camped out at the protests; restless and empty-handed, these youth had no jobs to be absent from, and no young spouses or houses of their own to go home to. Trapped in a liminal phase of pre-adulthood, youth blame the regimes that have placed too many roadblocks in their paths to maturity and societal acceptance. Ultimately, the Arab Spring was a political manifestation of cultural frustration for many Arab youth.

Resentment *of* the Arab Spring

But a final cultural issue may be worth noting here: youth frustration will not only be a cause of the Arab Spring, but also a consequence of it. In Egypt, a final-round vote between a former Mubarak crony and a Muslim Brotherhood leader came days after riots in Tahrir Square over the acquittal of Gamal Mubarak of crimes against protestors. Everyday Egyptians are only beginning to come to terms with the truth of their 2011: the protests in Tahrir Square ended one State of Emergency only to usher in a new one. Moroccans have begun new demonstrations in Casablanca, now frustrated that the Islamist government elected after the king's reforms has not yet lived up to campaign promises. Libyans, after slaying Gaddafi, live in a tentative state precariously balanced between hopeful democrats and transnational *mujahideen* with enough power to murder an American ambassador. And though the final shape of Syria is yet to be known, 2012 will likely be remembered as the darkest time of Syrians' lives. At its worst, "the Arab Spring has been a dismal failure. All indications are that what comes next will be significantly worse than what existed before, in Tunisia and everywhere else, and the traumatic events up to now have already caused untold havoc and violence and made the lives of innocent ordinary people even

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.

more miserable than they already were. Socially and economically, the Arab Spring has put back countries like Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria by decades" (Bradley 2012:215).

The causes of the Arab Spring were far broader and more culturally, politically, and economically ingrained in the lives of Arab youth than one leader or figurehead. Ousting the leader will only temporarily lessen tensions; far more significant will be the real changes in the state apparatuses and governmental structures of Arab states, in terms of privatization of certain industries, the opening of the private sector, reorganization and implementation of new educational policy, job creation, housing market control, and democratic progress. 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.

But this is not the first time that the Arab world has experienced revolutions, nor will it be the last. Youth in the Arab world have often found cultural identity within the socio-political movements of their times. For a generation of Arabs, Nasser and the pan-Arabism he fathered became cultural touchstones. Many Moroccans proudly self-identify with the ideals of the Green March of 1975, while Lebanese had their own understandings of both their national and religious identities rewritten that same year with the beginning of the Lebanese civil war. Neighboring non-Arab states have had similar experiences; an entire generation of Iranians connect their identity to that of the 1979 Revolution, depending on which side one allied himself. Young Iranians, no longer lulled by the siren's song of a 30-year-old broken promise, sought to create their own revolutionary identity in 2009, only to be stalled in the process by the aging regime. 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.

Which leads to the question no one wants to ask: what will happen if the promise of the Arab Spring is a lie? Though I am optimistic about the role

of Islamists in shaping a liberal, pious future for the Arab world, there are many in the region who are more doubtful of the truth behind moderate Islamist politics in North Africa. There is more violence in the region, as well as more economic instability, but these sacrifices have not been met with significant restructuring of government apparatuses or economic policy. Even those youth who put their lives on the line in Tahrir Square and Benghazi may not be able to hold back the waves of youth frustration as each subsequent revolution fails to bring the opportunity or hope that is promised. How many "days of rage" are required for Arab youth to qualify as a lost generation?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE ARAB FUTURE

Improving the youth situation in the Arab world is necessary for global and regional stability. The financial costs of massive youth unemployment in the region have been well-documented (Chaaban 2008; e4e 2011); Arab nations will continue to lose potential GDP in the future if they fail to use a large and eager segment of their employable workforce. The political costs are also extremely high: educated, single, and empty-handed, Arab youth have little to lose and a lot to demand. Without outlets for participating in the political process, these youth have taken to the streets across the Arab world to overthrow their countries' regimes, or to at least demand significant reorganization of their governments.

Even if economic reform eases current tensions, the feeling of being trapped in a pre-adulthood phase has alienated a number of Arab youth and will have longer-term implications for the current youth cohort's sense of dignity and identity. Those who feel trapped in childhood status in regard to their families, especially when unable to move out of the home, may experience strained familial relations, a societal concern in an Arab world where the family is paramount. A "brain-drain," in which the best and brightest minds leave the Arab world because of a perceived lack of opportunity, is also a potential long-term negative effect. Rising rates of premarital sex often correlate to increases in the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies, both of which still carry extreme social stigma in the Arab world. The inability of youth to afford low-income housing will also lead to the rise of slums, which

come with their own set of socio-economic challenges. All of these potential problems stem from the fundamental failure of the governments and even societies of the Arab world to provide youth with the opportunities necessary to develop a sense of dignity and identity while building adult lives and achieving adult social status for themselves.

Many of the problems discussed above, such as significant youth demographic bulges or the rising costs of marriage, are not unique to the Arab world, but they are relevant today for two main reasons. First, the combination of these factors—a youth bulge, massive youth unemployment, increasing quantity but decreasing quality of education, large numbers of unemployed degree-holders, delayed marriage, and housing access concerns—translates into a massive societal problem not seen to this extreme elsewhere. Nowhere else in the world do youth have such a difficult time becoming adults, and only in the Arab world is the alienation of youth so powerful along *every* possible avenue of adulthood-attainment. Second, these problems became of central relevance to the world when demonstrators in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere would not leave the streets until they experienced change. These problems are of such importance to the lives of Arab youth that, tired of waiting on their government's inability or unwillingness to offer real opportunity, they have demanded their place in the world through protest and regime change. Governments, Arab and Western, need to accept that these youth will continue to protest and express frustration if their needs are not met, and it would not be surprising to see echoes of the Arab Spring in subsequent demonstrations in the short- and medium-term future. 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.

These problems are of such importance to the lives of Arab youth that, tired of waiting on their government's inability or unwillingness to offer real opportunity, they have demanded their place in the world through protest and regime change.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Chloe Mulderig is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Boston University and was a 2011 Pardee Graduate Summer Fellow. Her upcoming dissertation explores the creation of religious identity and hypocrisy among young women in Fes, Morocco.

Her current research focuses on issues of youth identity, religious experience, and political authority in both Morocco and the greater Islamic world.

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Boston University The Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future

Pardee House
67 Bay State Road
Boston, Massachusetts 02215
www.bu.edu/pardee
Email: pardee@bu.edu
Tel: +1 617-358-4000
Fax: +1 617-358-4001

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