Arab Youth Values and Identities: Impact of the Arab Uprisings

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The wave of uprisings and social unrest that swept through Arab countries, together with the prominent role played by youth in instigating and maintaining a "revolutionary" momentum, have motivated reflections about the transformative influence these events might have had in shaping new identities and emerging values. This paper focuses on youth in the Arab region and explores identity dynamics and value preferences in the diverse Arab landscape following the 2011 uprisings.

The Youth Bulge

The Arab uprisings occurred in the context of seriously deteriorated living conditions under highly repressive autocratic regimes and a bulging youth population (see the Arab Human Development Reports,[1] 2002-2009). The Arab populations' 357 million people are young, with a majority in many countries under the age of 25. Some estimate that a third of the Arab region's population is under the age of 15, and a fifth is between the ages of 15 and 24. This "youth bulge" is thought to have peaked in 2010, and it is set to decline from 20 to 17% in the coming years (Mirkin, 2013).

While Arab youth are more educated and marrying at a later age than before, some Arab countries still suffer from high illiteracy rates. The majority of Arabs (55%) do not access the Internet (Arab Opinion Index, 2013) and rely on TV as their main source of information. Rates, however, differ greatly by country. While only a minority (22%) of Egyptians use the Internet, majorities do in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Tunisia (Dennis et al., 2013). Even before the Arab uprisings, youth unemployment rates in the region were the highest in the world, ranging between 20 and 40% compared to worldwide averages of 10 to 20% (ESCWA, 2009). Post-uprisings assessments report a significant increase in youth unemployment, with one in three Arab young people without a job (Urdal, 2012). The Arab region is the only region where unemployment exceeds 10% (around 27% in 2012), and with twice the global rate for youth (Mirkin, 2013). Conservative estimates suggest that 12 million jobs need to be added by 2025 to absorb this young workforce, while others put estimates as high as 5 million jobs per year until 2020.

These global figures also differ by region. While youth unemployment rates are low in most GCC countries[2] (as low as 2% in Qatar), they rise to about 30% in Egypt, and up to 44% in Iraq (Mirkin, 2013). It is no wonder that almost a quarter of Arabs would like to emigrate in search of better prospects, and that employment concerns rank as the highest priority across several polls and countries (e.g. Arab Opinion Index, 2013; Asdaa', 2014).

It is also no surprise that some analysts associate youth bulges with political violence (e.g. Urdal, 2012). Given the right conditions, a surge in the youth population could galvanise socio-economic development and enable societies to "reap the dividends of the youth bulge." However, in the context of exceptionally high unemployment rates and

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[1] A new AHDR on "Youth in the Arab countries" is due to be published in 2015.
[2] Saudi Arabia has an exceptionally high youth unemployment rate, at 30% (Mirkin, 2013).

significant socio-economic challenges, a youth bulge can turn into a liability, with increased risks of social upheavals and challenges to the status quo.

The Arab Uprising: Authoritarian Regimes and the Absence of Ideology

High levels of corruption, incompetent and ageing authoritarian regimes, socio-political repression, abusive treatment, and difficult living conditions are some of the factors that eventually led to massive social protests across several Arab countries. Long-standing autocrats in Egypt and Tunisia were ousted in a matter of weeks, sending shockwaves across the Arab region and pushing neighbouring regimes to quickly instigate reforms (e.g. Morocco), disburse large cash bonuses (e.g. Saudi Arabia), or brutally repress dissent (e.g. Bahrain, Syria).

Young people occupied public spaces in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, while smaller protests occurred in every other Arab country from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian-Arabian Gulf. The fact that the uprisings neither involved ideological platforms nor proposed alternative governance models or regimes is quite telling. Concerns for dignity, social justice and better overall governance are often cited as the primary motivators behind the uprisings, and they are indicative of the values and identities that animated the youth.

Identities: Unity in Diversity

Each of the uprisings in the Arab world took a different path and reached a different outcome, clearly reflecting the diverse socio-historical dynamics behind them. The discrepancies and divergences in the path the uprisings took hint at widely differing conditions, populations, and aspirations. Furthermore, country-specific outcomes ranged from peaceful and rapid transitions to the most brutal and protracted of repressions.

Yet, the rapid – contagious – spread of popular uprisings across different Arab contexts points to a shared sense of future and communality across populations and identities. A recent representative survey of 20,350 people from 14 Arab countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Mauritania, Sudan,

Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait and Libya) showed that "79% of the Arab public believes in the integrity of a single Arab nation, or that the various Arab peoples comprise one nation, notwithstanding the possible differences between Arab peoples" (Arab Opinion Index, 2013). This unitary identity, endorsed by an overwhelming majority of citizens across the spectrum of Arab countries, has also been growing over time, with a 7% increase between 2011 and 2013.

Yet, this consensus about Arab identity and the communality of Arab peoples does not preclude the prominent co-existence of other social identities specific to each of the Arab countries or cultural regions. While multiple identities can be organised in a hierarchical model of inclusiveness (Harb, 2010), specific identities are preferentially sampled in different contexts. An overview of the uprisings in the Arab world points to four salient social identities: national, pan-national (Islamic and/or Arab), tribal-familial, and ethno-sectarian. For example, an Al-Jazeera poll of 8,045 young people in "four uprising countries" showed youth endorsing an Islamic identity before a national one in Tunisia, Yemen and Libya, but not in Egypt, where national identity was held first. Other identities (political, professional, regional, etc.) do not seem to be widely endorsed in Arab societies.

Cultural Differences

The Arab world is often perceived as four large cultural entities: the Fertile Crescent countries (Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine), the Gulf Countries (the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries), the Nile countries (Egypt and Sudan), and the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco).

The **Fertile Crescent countries** have the most diverse populations within the Arab world, with multiple ethnicities and sects spread across their territories. Nationalist and secular parties have dominated rule in these countries, often under authoritarian regimes. The region is now plagued by inter-sectarian conflict, insecurity, and potential disintegration pushing youth towards immigration or stricter sectarian and tribal affiliations. The US invasion of Iraq fed Sunni-Shia divisions, and the uprising in Syria quickly drew in regional sectarian actors, each push-

ing its own agenda. The presence of radicalised Sunni groups affiliated with al-Qaeda in all countries of the Fertile Crescent further polarised the youth along sectarian lines, especially in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. The weakened central governments and the pervasive security threats left youth with few options other than affiliating with sectarian networks that provided them with a sense of group security and a source of basic services. The multi-polarity of the financial and military assistance provided by regional (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel) and international (US, Europe and Russia) powers exacerbated the conflict and continues to fan the flames of sectarian tensions.

Egypt: Historically, the political dynamics in Egypt have continuously pitted two main ideological streams: the military-nationalistic parties and the Islamic parties. Until the 2011 uprising, all Egyptian presidents had a military background and entertained a nationalistic discourse. The popular uprising of 2011, initiated by progressive youth groups, eventually brought together secular, nationalist and Islamist forces against the corruption of an ageing and abusive autocratic regime. The post-Mubarak era was quickly transformed into a competition between three main factions: the weakened old guard, with its extensive network of clients and dependents; the Muslim Brotherhood, with its organised and ideologically driven membership; and youth and civil groups, with weak organisational skills and little experience. The Muslim Brotherhood's experienced political organisation helped them win (albeit with a small margin) the first democratic election since the founding of the Egyptian republic in 1953.

The instability that rocked Egypt after the election of the Muslim Brotherhood to Parliament, and then to the Presidency, along with the continued insecurity and difficult living conditions across Egypt, pushed a sizeable portion of the population to seek stability and security. The promises made by the military appealed to some, while the persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood and, later, of youth revolutionary groups (e.g. the 6 April movement) upset others.

Egyptians are currently split with regard to their leadership preferences. A recent Pew poll conducted just prior to the May 2014 elections showed an almost 20% decline in favourable attitudes towards the army, the Muslim Brotherhood and the judicial courts. Support for Al-Sisi was marginal, with 54%

for and 45% against. Importantly, a large majority of Egyptians (72%) reported being dissatisfied with the way things are going in Egypt, on par with dissatisfaction levels prior to the 2011 uprisings and on course for more instability ahead.

A majority of Egyptian youth (72%) support a civil state with little military involvement, and 96% reported not belonging to any political party (Al Jazeera, 2013). While a majority of Egyptians do not support the Muslim Brotherhood, a large proportion does not support a return to military rule either. The latest presidential election saw only a third of the electorate turn out to vote in the first two days of the election, and a noticeable absence of young voters. The massive media campaigns in support of Al-Sisi, a questionable 24-hour extension of voting, and rumoured threats of fines and prosecution for those who boycotted the election did little to change the results.

The **GCC countries** present a different socio-economic profile from the Fertile Crescent countries and Egypt. The oil-rich nations continued their clampdown on political dissent at home and immediately spent billions of dollars to prevent the contagious uprisings from reaching their kingdoms (e.g. the 3 months' salary bonus provided to employees in Saudi Arabia). While freedoms are certainly restricted in most GCC countries, their oil-based economies and high GDP make their populations slightly less inclined to rebel.

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The GCC monarchies are strongly dependent on family networks and ties, and a strict socio-normative enforcement of Islamic texts. While a number of youth espouse conservative values and observe strict Wahabi or Salafi codes, another substantial segment of the youth population aspires to lifestyles and values more in line with their globalised identities. Saudi Arabia has already sent over 145,000 students to study abroad, and the number of scholarships for

studying in the West continues to grow. International centres of excellence have opened branches in the GCC countries, and both Dubai and Doha are now recognised globalised cities.

The Maghreb: Popular unrest in Libya and Tunisia led to the demise of the leadership in both countries, but the current situation between the two neighbours could not be any more different. While transition to democratic governance is proceeding relatively smoothly in Tunisia, chaos and warfare plague post-Gaddafi-era Libya. Tunisian youth continue to be divided between left-wing secular groups and Islamic parties, but the dialogue between them tends to be pragmatic and peaceful. Tunisian youth remain engaged in public life, and national debates on the future of Tunisia continue unabated. In contrast, Libya remains beset by tribal and regional loyalties, and warring factions do not seem any closer to unity or a national identity. The administrative vacuum left in the wake of an uprising largely supported by international forces is difficult to fill in a country saddled by decades of international isolation and no history of political parties and debates.

The 2011 uprisings briefly affected Algeria and Morocco. However, vivid memories of Algeria's bloody civil war, with its 100,000 dead, may have made Algerians wary of brutal change. The recent re-election of the ailing President may signal a concern for stability, especially in light of the violent outcomes in Libya, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain. However, the low voter turnout and the boycott by some parties may be indicative of growing dissatisfaction. On the other hand, Morocco's monarch was quick to seize the post-uprising moment and initiated large-scale constitutional reforms that were overwhelmingly adopted in a July 2011 referendum. This was quickly followed by national elections that saw the rise of moderate Islamic parties on par with developments in Egypt and Tunisia.

Values

The Arab uprisings have also raised questions about the changes in the value systems of the rebellious populations, with many assuming that the 2011 events transformed Arab societies from passive and subdued populations to dynamic and potentially democratically-oriented ones.

Values are beliefs or concepts that pertain to desirable behaviours or end states and that guide the selection or evaluation of events and behaviour (Schwartz, 1992). Because values represent motivational goals, they tend to transcend specific situations and change only in the context of major life events. The proposition that the uprisings were sufficient to change individual values beyond the increased need for security may not be warranted. A majority of Arabs did not partake in the uprisings and little has changed in their immediate lives: some heads may have rolled in some countries, but the difficult conditions that preceded the uprisings have only worsened since. The groups directly involved in collective action may have experienced substantial changes to their worldview, but not necessarily in the direction advertised by some media outlets.

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The sixth wave of the World Value Survey, released in May 2014, included a record number of 12 Arab countries (Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain, Kuwait, Algeria, Qatar, Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan). This popular worldwide survey of values posits that countries can be classified along two bipolar dimensions: a) traditional versus secular-rational values [sic][3] and b) survival versus self-expression values (WVS, 2014). This latest post-uprising survey showed Arab countries ranking highest globally on both traditional and survival values, i.e. at the conceptual opposites of the secular, rational, self-expressive countries composed of "Protestant

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[3] The labelling of these value dimensions has condescending connotations and assumes that traditional societies may possess irrational values.

Europe" and "English-speaking countries" (WVS, 2014). The authors also state that "the social dominance of Islam and individual identification as Muslim both weaken emancipative values," oblivious to the rebellions that swept the Arab world. This reductionist view assumes a rather static set of Arab societies and fails to capture the popular uprisings' demands for change (emancipation) without the need to transform their value system.

Repeated polls in the Arab world show a high Arab endorsement of religion across countries. While such findings allude to a potentially observant and devout population, they do not explain the cultural practices and the role religion actually plays in the lives of Arab peoples. The idea that Islam is a monolithic religion permeates the (Orientalist) literature, and little attention is given to the competing creeds within Islam: dozens of traditions and sects exist within each of the main branches of Islam (Sunni, Shia and Sufi), and they range from the strictest interpretation to the loosest. The region's diversity of traditions and beliefs also reflects the social complexity of an area rich with millennia-old history. As such, monolithic and reductionist approaches are both faulty and prejudicial. In addition, political freedoms are denied in most Arab countries, with state security brutally clamping down on dissent and organised action. Mosques (and universities) remain the only "free" spaces where people can gather and discuss social and political challenges (virtual spaces excepted). Under ideologically bankrupt regimes, and in the absence of political freedoms, religion was quick to flourish.

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A poll of 3,500 young people from 16 different Arab countries showed that family, friends and religion held the most influence in shaping the youths' lives, but also found a growing number of young people embracing "modern values" (ASDA'A, 2014). Almost half the participants in the 2014 poll endorsed the statement "Traditional values are outdated and belong in the past. I am keen to embrace modern values and beliefs," a three-fold increase over the 2011 findings (17%, 25%, 40%, and 46% for 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014, respectively). While the survey has serious limitations (e.g. small sample sizes, construct validity, etc.), this noticeable and robust trend was consistent across data sets.

Conclusions

The euphoric images of millions of youths gathering in public spaces chanting for a change of regime across several Arab countries have long faded. The public spaces in Cairo, Sanaa, Tunis, Tripoli, Damascus and Manama are now largely empty. Three overlapping phases can be observed in the post-2011-uprisings era: the first phase saw popular uprisings and youth groups taking to the streets; the second saw Islamic parties affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood reap the electoral benefits; and the third saw counter-revolutionary efforts spread across the region, especially in Egypt and Syria. The pan-Arab revolutionary ebb of 2011 has now been replaced by a counterrevolutionary flow in key states and chaotic infighting in others.

It is no wonder that many citizens in the Arab world are wary of the uprisings. The Al Jazeera poll (2013) found that more than 90% of young people surveyed refrain from partisan affiliation and do not want to belong to any political party in future. Political disaffection does not mean young people are any less involved in current affairs, with a majority in all countries now following news developments and events.

Regional interference: The large majority of Arabs (82%) continue to support a "pluralistic political system in which all parties can compete through regular elections, regardless of ideology" (Arab Opinion Index, 2013). However, the youth's aspirations and the process of self-determination are not occurring in a vacuum, but amidst strong local, regional and international interference. Old elites are on the counter-offensive in Egypt, Syria and Yemen, and regional powers (Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran) are directly interfering in the various contexts, each vying to protect its self-interests or expand its area of influence.

The oil-rich GCC countries constitute a primary Western strategic interest and the security of the monarchies is assured by a heavy US military

presence in the region. On the other hand, the GCC monarchies (especially Saudi Arabia) have a strategic interest in actively curbing the Arab uprisings because a) unrest may spread to their kingdoms and threaten their own rule and b) the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and its relatively moderate version of Islam is a direct threat to their own Wahabi interpretation and influence. The fact that Saudi Arabia hosts the deposed Yemeni and Tunisian autocrats, backed the King of Bahrain, and poured billions of dollars into support for the military coup in Egypt is quite telling.

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The Arab uprisings were not driven by ideological change (e.g. a religious uprising or democracy-seeking populations) but by feelings of exasperation with current conditions and practices. While many now seem to call for stability and security, the social conditions that led to the uprisings continue to worsen, and instability is likely to remain. The Arab uprisings are still ongoing and have yet to settle. It may thus be too early to cast identities and values as crystalised, as both are still being forged and shaped by the fires sweeping the region.

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