Problematising Arab Youth: generational narratives of systemic failure

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ABTRACT

Arab youth have proved to be an engine for long-awaited political change in the region, but who are they and how should we understand them as a phenomenon rather than simply a social category? This paper suggests that the various paradigms which exist for identifying and explaining Arab youth are individually in themselves insufficient. By combining their contributions, however, Arab youth becomes visible as a lived and shared generational narrative of the exclusion and marginalisation which have resulted from post-independence state failures in the political, economic and social realms. Their subsequent informal and alternative formats for protest and action reveal the links between the local and the global of youth narratives.

Introduction

> "Youth are the key to success and the guarantor for achieving our people's aspirations for further prosperity and progress. This prompts us to step up efforts and diversify programmes, policies and measures in order to meet the challenge of employment and make optimum use of our young national competences to serve Tunisia's prosperity and its people's well-being.
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> We will spare no effort to further promote the conditions of our youth in all fields. We are always keen on imbuing them with national values and with the sense of patriotism, sacrifice and allegiance to Tunisia alone while disseminating the sense of civic behaviour and the culture of volunteerism among them and encouraging them to take interest in public matters."
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> Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Speech at opening of 2009 Presidential
> Electoral Campaign, 12 October 2009.

When former Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, launched what turned out to be his last presidential electoral campaign in 2009 with these words, he was recognising the enormous importance of a growing social category upon which the country's economic and social future would depend. Little did he realise at the time that Tunisian youth would ultimately provide the engine of social protest which would propel him personally from power and into exile in Saudi Arabia.

The political turmoil in Tunisia and Egypt at the start of 2011 brought Arab youth to the world's attention in a very dramatic way. In accounting for the rapidity of the mass mobilisation, and the urgency of the popular demands expressed, analysts pointed to the region's exceptionally high rates of youth unemployment, the development over the last decade of youth-based activist groups, and the use of new communications technologies favoured by youth, as key resources of the uprisings. This was in some ways a culmination, a coming of age, of a phenomenon that has been making its mark on the region for some years now.

In fact, Arab youth activism, in its lived and on-line forms, has been progressively more overt over the past decade. Its form might have been more diffuse than what may be termed conventional political activism, occupying new spaces and performative formats. But it had undoubtedly become a political reality before the Arab Spring and Arab regimes have struggled for some time to find ways to bring their youthful populations inside the fence of formal – and restrictive - political structures.

But formal political structures and demonstrations of paternalistic Presidential concern for youth did little to address the real and growing crisis presented by a dramatic demographic youth bulge and, as if the regime was squeezing sand in its hands, innovative and independent youth activist practices began to seep into the national political fabric. Undoubtedly new social media formats played a key role, enabling a virtual world of youth protest and an evolving political culture.

But while significant attention was being paid by analysts and academics to both the new social media and youth-driven organisations, less was paid to the difficulties of problematising 'youth' in a meaningful way, of identifying on whom the term might legitimately be conferred or what constitutes the set of interests and identities which enable 'youths' to cohere into a distinct sub-set of broader Arab

societies. We knew they were there, we knew they had something to say, but there was no consensus on exactly *who* they were, *what* it was they wanted, or their *significance* as a rising social and political force. However, the recent uprisings across North Africa, and as yet unresolved instabilities elsewhere in the Arab world, have brought Arab youth starkly into the foreground (and one could add to that their Iranian counter-parts who played such a significant role in the failed resistance to the 2009 election victory of President Ahmedinajad). The uprisings and protests have been presented by both local and global media as youth-led and it is now urgent that we establish a deeper, richer and more textured understanding of youth and the evolution of their role in national and regional developments.

This article argues that a number of paradigms currently exist for the study of Arab youth but that, while each has something to offer, they are individually insufficient to fully explain the current phenomenon. Collectively, however, they lead us to understand Arab youth as a generational narrative, a lived and shared experience which traverses public and private life and which is reflective of the political, economic and social failures of authoritarian regimes. Repressive and stagnant political structures, economies with ever-wider disparities in income and wealth, and restricted access to the social benefits of adulthood, have combined into a collective experience of frustration, marginalisation and alienation which is not dependent specifically on age, so much as what the German sociologist, Karl Mannheim (1928), might have termed 'a similarity of location'.

Excluded from conventional avenues for political expression, Arab youth have constructed their own formats for protest and activism, which reflect this shared narrative and which may also be said to illustrate their membership of, and commonality with, a wider, global, youth corpus.

How Arab youth are framed

There already exist a number of ways of framing Arab youth; as demographic "bulge" (which implies a quantitative approach), as a human resource issue (including both educational employment aspects), as a subsequent arena for public policy, as a state of transition to adulthood (wherein Arab youth are depicted as in a stage of 'waiting'), and as a constructed identity or set of identities. The following section will outline the propositions of each frame, a process which foregrounds the multiple dimensions of being young in the Arab world.

Arab youth is commonly referenced as a demographic 'bulge', relating to the demographic pyramids of Arab populations which have become profoundly unbalanced. In 2005 35.2% of the entire Arab population of the Middle East were under the age of 15. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Yemen this figure was as high as 45.9%, significantly higher than the average for least developed states (UNDP, 2009: 232). Another third of the populations are between the ages of 15 and 29 (Dhillion and Yousef, 2009: 11) - a whopping 100 million people (one in five) were between the ages of 15 and 24 (Assad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2009:1). If we define youth in terms of age, then there can be little doubt that the region is home to an exceptionally large youth, or rather youthful, population. This youth bulge derives from the combination of declining rates of infant mortality with sustained fertility rates (births per woman) which marked the region during the second half of the twentieth century. Female and infant health improved with the introduction of medical advances and welfarist regimes but, rather than this leading to the reduced incentive to have large families which was expected to accompany urbanisation, modernisation and post-subsistence household economics, female fertility continued to carry cultural and even political (nationalist) significance. A larger population was a stronger population, and distributive wealth policies (backed by oil rent) eased the burdens which this might have otherwise placed on families. By 1980 the region's population growth rate had peaked at around 3% per annum, but as oil rents receded and as national economies began to stagnate, Arab regimes woke up to the implications of endorsing rapid population growth without having the resources to support them which by now their citizens were coming to expect. Low-key, culturally sensitive family planning programmes were subsequently introduced in some countries (Tunisia was perhaps a forerunner here). Fertility did begin to decline: in 2009 the MENA population as a whole was growing at around 2% per annum, compared with a global average of just 1.2% (Assad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2009: 1). Thus not only do MENA countries continue to have relatively young populations, but they also have the world's largest youth bulge which is yet to work its way through the demographic pyramid.

It is also evident that this demographic 'youth bulge' brings with it specific political and economic challenges for regimes. To some extent these differ according to the variations in individual national demographic profiles but overall for Arab regimes,

and indeed international institutions, youth as a social category has evolved into an arena for public policy.

To some extent, this has been framed in terms of something not dissimilar to the neo-classical economic notion of human capital formation, which stresses the education and skills of young people as a component of the workforce, identifying their relative dependency or productivity as their key attribute. From this perspective, two features of the Arab region come into stark relief: the failures of education to prepare Arab youth for employment in the global economy and the disproportionate and relatively high levels of youth unemployment across the region.

From an educational point of view, the first implication is rising demand in enrolment, beginning with primary schooling but progressively throughout all tiers of education right up to tertiary and higher education and including new forms of educational provision which meet the demands of the global knowledge economy but which may not even exist as yet in some Arab countries. A World Bank report published in 2008 (World Bank, 2008: 95) stated that secondary and tertiary sectors are expected to experience particularly significant growth in demand. The report estimates that the secondary school population in the region will grow by one-third during the next thirty years, and that tertiary education cohorts will more than double. MENA states already spend approximately one fifth of their public expenditures on education (acknowledging that some of this may be wasted through corrupt practices and stagnatory pedagogies), and the combination of the neo-liberal squeeze on budgets and insufficient growth rates suggest they are unlikely to spend more, leaving the private sector to plug the holes and consequently leading to increasing disparities in the educational opportunities within populations. Ironically, even as it struggles to provide youth with educational opportunities, the region also faces a crisis in terms of youth educational drop-out rates. Overall around 15-20% of 6-20 year olds who should be compulsory schooling, are currently out of schooling, including some 13 million 6-15 year olds. Some have never attended school, others are too poor to attend school, are employed, are disabled or have health-related problems, speak only minority languages, are married or confined to the home, or live in conflict areas where schooling is impossible (World Bank, 2008:101-2). In short, even when the political will and public finances are available to promote universal education, intentions are frustrated by the complex inter-weavings of diverse development failures in other areas of economic, political and social life.

Even those who are able to progress through primary, secondary and tertiary education are often left with a skills deficit: the report highlighted the very modest returns on the historically high investments made in education, both in terms of the *quality* of the education provided and its relevance to labour market demands. The structural unemployment which is found across the region is thus compounded by the wave of new, young labour market entrants and youth unemployment has now become endemic to Arab countries, rich or poor. The *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries* (UNDP, 2009: 108-9) noted that the Arab region not only displays relatively high unemployment rates in general (from a low of 6.3% in Bahrain to a staggering 46% in Algeria) but that this unemployment affects youth disproportionately. High-income Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar have youth unemployment rates between 17 and 26%. Middle-income countries including Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Oman, Syria and Morocco vary between 16 and 39%, whilst low income Mauritania, Sudan, Yemen and Djibouti range from 29-44%. "Overall, in the year 2005/6 the unemployment rate among the young in the Arab countries is nearly double that in the world at large, 30 per cent compared to 14 per cent". The report estimates that 51 million new jobs would be needed in the Arab world by 2020 to absorb new entrants to the labour market. But with some countries experiencing on-going high levels of illiteracy (Egypt, Iraq and Yemen account for about three-quarters of the ten million illiterate youths in the region), and given the fact that the current educational provision does little to prepare youth for the needs of an increasingly globalised, technology-driven economy, there is little likelihood that these jobs will ever materialise.

A youth bulge should be an opportunity for economic growth – a 'demographic gift' of dynamic, working-age, lower-dependency ratio individuals who can contribute to the productive and savings sectors of the economy. Instead, the region is experiencing a bulge of dependent, under-utilised, and increasingly impoverished individuals who represent a poor return on the educational investment already made. The promises of post-independence regimes not only remain unfulfilled, but for those who were born too late to play a part in bringing them to power, the gap between rhetoric and reality leaves a deep sense of alienation and exclusion.

A different approach to framing youth in the Arab region, is to turn the lens away from their status as a component of macro-level economic structures (which

problematise them as problems), and towards the roles which education, employment and other social and institutional frameworks play in marking the transitions from childhood to adulthood (Saleh-Isfahani and Dhillon,2008) . Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Yousef (2009) have identified education, employment and family formation as three key institutions which are interdependent in making this transition. They argue that the younger generation of Arabs today are experiencing a very different transition to adulthood from previous generations. In traditional society, transition was mediated within a traditional framework of family, community and associated social norms. The traditional life course was the predominantly rural experience of populations at independence, comprising a lack of basic education, early employment, privileging of boys for education, the passing of occupations from one generation to the next, and early marriage (especially for girls, who are subsequently confined to domestic responsibilities such as child rearing).

When state structures expanded in the 1950s and 1960s, and as governments provided for the education, employment and protection of citizens, a new generation experienced a *welfarist* life course, which included higher living standards and a process of urbanisation which diminished traditional normative and institutional structures. Gender inequalities began to be erased through education, employment and the extension of political rights, while the influx of oil revenues into the region generated new labour mobilities.

Finally, the failures of the statist economic model when oil revenues declined in the 1980s, and the resulting stagnation and then retraction of the state, have not been matched in the post-welfare era with a reformulation of education to service the needs of the private sector rather than the political legitimation of the state. Again, the promises of the welfare era are not being met for the new generation, yet no institutional alternatives have been constructed which can prepare youth for the liberal market, or protect them from it. Consequently it is the current generation, the youth, who find themselves excluded and marginalised, socially, economically and politically. Their transition to adulthood is, as it were, 'stalled'. Dhillon *et al* describe young people as being in a state of *waiting* – struggling to develop the range of educational skills necessary to find meaningful employment, and thus earn an income to support progress to the next stage of independence and family formation. Failure at the early stages leads to cumulative failures and hence a growing sense of exclusion and marginalisation. Crucially, this generation is distinguishable from those

who came before and who experienced at least the early benefits of welfarism which gave them a better starting place in life than their own parents might have aspired to.

In this analysis, the problems identified earlier relating to the poor quality of education and the struggle to sustain universal access under resource pressures, and the problems associated with matching poorly trained labour to a weak labour market, are compounded by frustrations in an individual's personal life. Without a salary, a man cannot marry since he cannot access housing or support a family. Thus marriage – a key milestone in the transition from youth into adulthood – is delayed and the individual cannot attain full social inclusion in a society which still emphasises the importance of family, not least as the only legitimate context within which to have sexual relations. Unable to purchase a home, individuals remain within the parental home, dependent and subordinate and without the opportunity to move to new geographic locations in search of employment.

> "While early marriage persists in poorer, rural area where the traditional life course is more prevalent, the general trend is towards a delay of marriage. Contrary to common assumptions, young men in the Middle East have the lowest rates of marriage in the developing world. Only 50% of Middle Eastern men between the ages of 25 and 29 are married. Although the average age of marriage for women in the region is lower than that of men, similar trends prevail in regard to delayed marriage" (Dhillion and Yousef, 2009: 23).

But if marriage, the ultimate marker of the transition from youth to adulthood, is denied , alternative institutions have not been forthcoming. For example, interaction between the (unmarried) genders remains limited (albeit variably so across and within the countries of the region).   Norms of *dating* have certainly evolved, including temporary forms of marriage such as *'urfi* and *mut`a*, but parental disapproval means these are often conducted secretly, reinforcing the alienation from the family in spite of dependence upon it. (The sense of being different from one's parent's generation, and the norms and institutions to which they subscribe, is exacerbated.

The excluded status of youth has clear political dimensions. For a start, it impacts upon the connectedness between young citizens and the Arab state. One survey found that a weighted average of 30% of young people across Arab League

countries wanted to migrate permanently to another country if that was possible, indicating the dissatisfaction with their own national environments (The Silatech Index, 2010). There is even a term, *haraga* (literally- - those who burn [their papers]), for the young men (and increasingly women) who are so desperate to escape that they pay to be ferried on barely sea-worthy boats across the Mediterranean in a bit to gain illegal entry to Europe.

Reflecting the aspirations of those who remain, recent years have witnessed a proliferation of youth activism in national politics, although this has frequently been manifested outside of the established formal political structures and long-established political parties. The *April 6th Youth Movement* and *Youth for Change* in Egypt, the *National Campaign for Student Rights* and the *Jordanian Democratic Youth Union* in Jordan, the *Diplômés Chômeurs* (unemployed graduates) and the *Moroccan Association of Youth for Youth* in Morocco, the *Fifth Fence Group* in Kuwait, and the *Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights*– all represent broad swathes of youths who perceive their interests to be unrepresented by existing political structures and their needs to be unrecognised and unmet (Assad and Barsoum, 2007). This generation sets itself apart from its forebears, rejecting the latter' institutions and practices as unrepresentative of themselves.

For Roel Meijer (2000), such youth activism is a manifestation of the fluid, eclectic, pragmatic construction of Arab youth identities, - another 'framing' of youth, which are formulated within the context of a triangulation of family, state and street. If the family has historically been the place in which traditional norms and support systems were reproduced, and if the state appropriated many of these during the years of plenty, the Arab street is the location in which "alternative lifestyles and modes of through and action falling outside the family and the state" are played out. With the diminishing functionality of the family and the failures of the state to live up to its promises of provision, the street has assumed a new significance for Arab youth. It has become a spatial home for broad coalition social movements in which ideological affiliation is secondary (or even irrelevant) relative to membership of this politically, economically and increasingly socially excluded generation.

The street can be imagined as more than a physical location: the younger generation's access to, and skills with, new communicative technologies has been a prominent feature of their growing activism. Facilities like social networking sites, *twitter* and *YouTube* have become their networking terrain and the struggle to control

it has become a new interface of state-society confrontation. The performance of protest sometimes take the shape of cultural artefacts not normally associated with political activisim – the rapping music of *el Général* and *Malek Khemir* in Tunisia, You-tube posted cartoons of a pig-headed Leila Trabelsi, or blogs of an Egyptian girl seeking a husband, in doing so demonstrating how the political culture of youth is being formulated around its communicative culture. Notably, this communicative culture combines local preferences with those borrowed from a global cultural context, expressing a rejection of the nationalist exclusivism which marked the post-independence era.

Evidence suggests that 15-25 year olds, often termed late adolescents or early adults, are more engaged with the new technologies than any other age group and that internet use thereafter diminishes with advancing age (Synovate, 2007). Television might be even more significant: In Egypt, for example, and according to the Arab Advisers Group Egyptian Households Telecom and Media Survey Report of 2008 (Arab Advisors Group, 2008) 95.7% of 15-24 year olds watch television on a daily basis. They tend to favour movies, drama series and music formats, and are less likely to watch either news of religious broadcast formats than their elders, but the favoured formats still carry pro-social messaging and youth are increasingly being targeted as an audience in their own right, particularly by private satellite companies. For example, Dream 1 TV and the FM radio stations Nijoom FM and Nile FM, all focus on entertainment and topical discussions for youth. Religious programming for youth is also becoming a popular genre. However, such programming does not include the broad range of youth identities. In 2001, a UNICEF study in Egypt (UNICEF, 2001) found that adolescents (10-19 year olds) were developing their own distinct sub-culture as a result of their communicative exclusion by parents, schools and the mainstream media, and their consequent growing reliance on new formats for information and advice on things like forming friendships, managing gender relations, and relating to parents.

Given the massive expansion of agencies within the Arab informational sphere, and specifically those for which youths find themselves better equipped to interact than their parents, the current youth generation are likely to construct vastly different identities than those of their parents. The term 'patchwork identities' has been coined to describe the contemporary phenomenon of individuals constructing unique identities by mixing different styles and values drawn from the supermarket of

options presented by the increasingly diverse information and communication technologies, although admittedly this process may be different in the Arab world than in other regions given continuing cultural preferences for prolonged residence with the family home, deference to parental and proximate social opinion leaders, and a consequent greater intensity of youth 'sharing' of the communicative experience which takes place in family living rooms, public places, Internet café's and educational environments rather than behind closed doors in a young person's own bedroom.

The implications of these growing disparities in generational identities are as yet still poorly understood. A Brookings Institution report in 2003 is indicative of the uncertainties. On the one hand, it points to the growing connectivity between youth cultures across the globe:

"Films, television, and videocassettes are now broadly available, remorselessly projecting the lifestyles and preoccupations of international youth from various parts of the developing world. Music and clothing styles are usually the chief vehicles physically capturing generational differences, symbols of even more important statements about outlook. Youth is then no longer linked only to its own distinctive locally formed youth culture, but is open to certain options of association with an international "class" of youth with multiple shared values. These new values in the developing world often may be honoured primarily on the surface or exist primarily as sets of attitudes, even if they cannot always be acted upon as profoundly as among their western cultural mentors" (Fuller, 2003:7).

Contrarily, however, Fuller continues his analysis by offering a rising tide of Islamist radicalism as a likely impact of the frustration and exclusion of youth. He argues that "Research indicates that in high fertility states, where unemployment is high and radical political movements exist, large cohorts of youth from 18-24 years of age will be most directly affected by unemployment and will turn to radical political remedies. At this particular stage of political history in the Middle East, it is Islamic fundamentalism that is currently the main vehicle of radicalism" (p. 18). Fuller argues that it is the state of youth itself, and the lack of psychological and emotional maturity

that it entails, that leads youth to seek violent solution and – specifically in the case of the Middle East – terrorism and suicide operations.

Fuller's work can be seen as a product of its time of course: there can be little doubt that political Islam ran high among the *hittistes* of Algeria in the 1990s, the young, unemployed men who filled the city streets and propped up the walls and who ultimately "stopped kicking their heels and ran riot, smashing up the shopping mall where the 'tchi-tchi', the country's gilded youth, used to muster and consume" (Harding, 2002). But more recent evidence high-lights the diversities of cultural practices within Arab youth that suggest a very different and differentiated set of identities are emerging. These include gendered differences (which are more pronounced among lower socio-economic groupings), and national differences, which were not ameliorated by the large number of globally connected sources of information (Bahithat, 2010). Youth in Arab capitals are also more impacted by the forces of globalisation rather more visibly than their rural counter-parts (UNDP, 2006: 6); the effects of economic liberalism on jobs, food and services are compounded more directly by family fragmentation, detachment from cultural roots, and an environment marked by the symbols of global homogeneity (such as international brand names, foreign cuisines, shopping malls, architectural innovations and so forth).

Nonetheless, as Mai Yamani has ably demonstrated, traditional tribal, regional and sectarian identities can still work to create multiple and sometimes contradictory youth identities (Yamani, 2010: 7-20) . Thus, the idea that Arab youth will, by virtue of its youth, necessarily be mobilised en masse towards violent forms of Islamist political behaviour is not a credible proposition today.

That is not say, however, that they are not being politically mobilised in new and – as the recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and elsewhere are showing, profoundly significant ways. If youth as a constructed identity cuts across a range of other ideological, ethnic, sectarian, gender, class and national identities, its politically mobilised form seems to demonstrate a shared aspiration for better, more representative forms of national governance. In 2006 the Arab regional office of the UNDP and the United Nations Department for Social and Economic Affairs hosted a series of three meetings of "talented youth from across the region" to discuss "Arab Youth Strategising for the Millennium Development Goals". Whilst the resulting reports high-lighted the pivotally empowering roles of employment and education,

"the participants regarded governance as an equally necessary pillar for the development process. Democratic governance mechanisms provide an institutional framework for youth to participate in society, and manage community and state affairs" (UNDP, 2006: 7). It would be tempting to see this as a preoccupation of the UNDP and like-minded international agencies, but there is sufficient evidence to indicate that this is a primary concern of Arab youth themselves. For example, a 2010 survey of 1500 18-24 year olds in six Arab countries demonstrated that the generational lifestyle of Arab youth – which certainly included consumerism and a concern with brands and leisure activities on the one hand, with profound worry over unemployment, housing shortages, rising costs of living and even a growing problem of personal debt on the other , did not preclude youths from identifying democracy as their most urgent priority (Burson-Marsteller, 2011).

Following the Tunisian revolution, the American non-profit organisation, the National Democratic Institute, conducted a limited focus-group based study which aimed to "explore young peoples' perspectives on their country's past, present and future" (Collins, 2011: 2). The project found that Tunisian youth responded positively to the idea of democracy, but that they had very little faith in the capacity of either the national political culture or established institutions (including political parties) to ensure its full implementation. Tunisian youth considered themselves newly politicised but they were less interested in joining single political actors (considering the democratic transition as "a closed elite-led process"), than they were in continuing to voice demands for the government to address inflation, unemployment, freedom of the media, public accountability and an end to corruption. Political participation was considered to be less a matter of political party or formal civil society activism, and more an on-going process of protest, internet-based communication and mobilisation, and ultimately meaningful opportunities to vote.

This absence of interest in the structures and institutions of the state, has not prevented Arab regimes from at least attempting to reintegrate youth into their national projects. Recognising both the challenges presented by the demographic bulge, and the dangers of youth's self-removal from the political socialisation processes which once-upon-a-time legitimised the Arab state, some regimes recognised the need for proactive efforts to reach out to youth. Over the past decade and with the encouragement and assistance of international organisations such as

the Arab League[1], UNESCO[2], UNICEF[3], and the Euromed Youth Programme, those states under most obvious pressure began introducing national youth strategies, including Egypt in 2003, Jordan in 2004, Morocco in 2007 and Tunisia in 2008. Since the Uprisings in early 2011, wealthier monarchies have begun similar processes, including for example Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait. Youth has become a key public-policy area. Strategies typically involve youth-based events which supposedly bring empower youth to contribute to policy formulations on areas of concern such as education, employment, entrepreneurship, and social policy. Needless to say, they fail to address the key issue of the absence of democratic politics and the continued dominance of formal structures by an older generation which is not only largely exclusivist but is also seen to have failed the younger generation.

A generational narrative

The discussion of existing framings of Arab youth offered thus far indicates that Arab youth as a social category are united not just by age but by shared experiences of political, economic and social exclusion. This categorisation is indeed inclusive of not just those of a certain age conventionally associated with youth , but all those who have been marginalised by the spectrum of failures of the post-Independence Arab state. The demographic pyramid makes it inevitable that the vast majority might fall within the age range specified by governments and INGOS, but the narrative is shared by a wider group of diverse ages who count themselves as still "young" because of the limits to their life opportunities which they attribute to those failures. Thus they set themselves in opposition to an older generation, the generation of authoritarian rulers and those who brought them to power. Youth is a narrative of the failure of the system, its exclusionary practices, its inability to reconcile traditional social values and the realities of modernity, and its ultimate denial of the very freedom for national populations upon which its legitimacy was first established. As an iconic phrase of the Egyptian uprising put it: "we are all Khaled Said".[4]

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[1] See for example, the Arab League Programme on Empowering Youth.
[2] See for example, UNESCO's Empowering Youth Through National Plans project.
[3] For example, the National Youth Strategy for Jordan was designed in cooperation with UNICEF.
[4] This was the name given to a Facebook group created by Wael Gonhim and other activists after the 28-year old Khaled Said died while in police custody which highlighted human rights issues throughout the uprising.

This notion of generation corresponds to that developed in 1928 by Karl Mannheim, who stated that: "The unity of generations is constituted essentially by a similarity of location of a number of individuals within a social whole" (Mannheim, 1928:p.). Location is relative to what he termed "the social and historical process" and limits a generation to "a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and a characteristic type of historically relevant action". Generational unity is more likely to exhibit a strong bond when individuals both share data and the meanings they attribute to both data and ideas. We might say, then, that if Arab youth have such a range of shared experiences, knowledge of which has been increasingly transmitted to and amongst them via new communications formats such as satellite television and social media, and which have become framed in terms of shared ideals of freedom and justice, then they have created the bond which links spatially separate individuals into a generational unit separate from its predecessors. Indeed, their distinctiveness from – even antagonism towards - those predecessors is what defines them. Mannheim also suggested that the quicker the pace of social change, the more likely generational units were to cohere. The range of frameworks presented above for studying youth, between them identify a process of rapid social change in the post-independence era: a failed industrialisation model replaced by an economic liberalism which entirely reversed the normative basis for development strategies; a populist, corporatist welfarist political agenda replaced by brutal authoritarianism; education and aspiration replaced by joblessness and despair; a traditional, rural population urbanised into alienating mega-cities; nationalism confronted with global cultural forces – the list goes on.

But Mannheim's generational units were not necessarily concrete units, or organised exclusivist bodies. So, in the case of Arab youth, individuals may move in and out of this generational nnarrative fluidly – experiences like unemployment, delayed marriage or political frustration draw people in, but the patchwork composition of contemporary youth identities means that nothing is set in stone, different components of the narrative have greater or lesser significance for individuals and at different points in time, and opportunities or material fortune can render it less immediately relevant. Un-bound by identities or ideologies which tied them to the post-independence state, Youth – those who have never known any alternative system and thus feel they have not colluded in this one's construction and

maintenance, - have become the voice-piece of resistance and the more generalisable desire for profound transformatory change.

Thus it should be no surprise that the younger generation has taken centre-stage in the uprisings of 2011. In fact, even the then-Presidents of Tunisia and Egypt initially framed the protests in generational terms, specifically as the irresponsible behaviour of rebellious youth. Hosni Mubarak, in his speech on 10th February, addressed "the youth of Egypt today in Tahrir Square", describing his words as "a father's dialogue with his sons and daughters". Although he declared his willingness to listen to the youth, the legitimacy of their claims, and their inclusion in national dialogue, he also invoked his own youth as an example of "military honour, allegiance and sacrifice for my country". He called on the youth to reject "the machinations and glee of those who were gleeful and machinated against" Egypt, implying that they had been led astray, encouraged by foreign elements to promote division rather than harmony. In Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's last speech to the Tunisian people he spoke of the demonstrations as being led by small, "delinquent" , "groups of bandits" who were forcing school children to be confined to the home and to miss school as authorities feared for their safety. In both speeches, the rejection of the regimes by youth was effectively attributed to youthful naïveté and deviation from the path of rightful and patriotic behaviour (YouTube, 20011 and BBC, 2011).

The speeches reflected the prevailing regime paradigms of Arab youth, as either 'youth as trouble' or 'youth as victims'. For conservative elements (in and out of the state itself), this meant the state had a responsibility to bring youth back to traditional values , to cultural, social and religious responsibility. For regime elites, it meant containing the expression of youth dissatisfaction under the pretext of protecting them from themselves. They then took upon themselves a parenting role (Swedenburg, 2007) which was supposed to protect youth from harmful influences, to supervise and instruct them, to guide them into productive activity and ultimately to reproduce the narrative of the state itself. As the independence generation aged, so the heroic potential of youth was considered to be diminishing. Engagement with global consumer culture had passified and depoliticised them, diverting them into supposedly frivolous fixations with entertainment and fashion. As the Introduction to a conference organised by the American University of Beirut's Center for Behavioural Research in 2009 put it: "The young are afflicted by another dissonant reality. They are often conceived and celebrated as the hopes and builders of the

future, yet stigmatized and feared as disruptive and parasitic forces" (Khalaf et al, 2009: 2).

To regimes, as to Western observers, the visible features of the new youth culture such as consumerism, rai and rap musics, and Internet-based social networking, too often suggested an alternative but still simplistic picture of teenage rebellion and wilful self-removal from the social main-stream, of de-politicisation and indifference. For Swedenburg, such interpretations missed the subtleties and nuances of youthful navigation of the greylands where local and global meet, where modernity makes its mark. In fact, he argues, through such activities youth retains its agency, although in 2007 it was unclear whether that agency was to be exercised in pursuit of aspirations that were "emancipatory, mundane, or somewhere in between". The "in between" is reflected in Mona Harb's article in the same report, in which she demonstrates how Hizbollah-inclined youths in Beirut seek to pursue fun but within spaces which retain their religious piety and moral codes. It is not a case of youths choosing between the leisure culture for which their city is re-knowned and the religious culture of their family and local communities, but rather of finding new ways and sites to enjoy the possibilities presented by modernity without abandoning entirely their normative social constructs. As she says:

> "This is clearly a generation that is bringing its own interpretations, tastes and desires, including a desire for piety itself (variously interpreted) to the *hala islamiyya*, thus contributing to shifts in the norms and practices of daily life. In this regard, pious Shi'I youth are like any youth in other communities and neighbourhoods of Beirut and elsewhere, negotiating self and community, voicing claims and contesting boundaries, hoping and desiring invented futures" (Harb, 2007: 4).

Perhaps it is because this agency of youth was so over-looked, or misdiagnosed, that the world (including the Arab region) was so taken by surprise when Tunisians and Egyptians rose up against their rulers with such efficiency. Far from being entirely spontaneous and unorchestrated, the Egyptian demonstrations were in part the culmination of intensive on-line youth-based social networking activity in support of civil activism and labour strikes over a number of years. In a short commentary in the *al-shorfa* weblog, Egyptian professor of social sciences, Hazem Salah, was

quoted as saying that the combination of social, economic and political pressures "transformed university youth groups from ones that were scattered and unemployed and spent their time in cafes, to revolutionary groups that have staff, rules and established structures". Through discussion spaces available on Facebook, "youth developed their political tools from mere slogans to a more in-depth look at the reasons for asking for change and the means to achieve it" (Abu Al-Khair, 2011). The paradigm has been reversed and Youth have become the new Arab heros.

Three particular features of the activism of the Arab Spring lend weight to the proposition that Arab youth can best be conceived of as a generational narrative based on common shared experiences of marginalisation and exclusion.

Firstly, even after the tyrants have been ousted, youth activists have indicated that they do not trust the older generations who lead opposition movements to complete the revolution. In Egypt, example, the youth wing of the Muslim Brotherhood began lobbying within the organisation for internal reforms. They organised a "Voice from Inside" conference which expressed concerns that the movement's old guard, who had anyway come late to the revolution, would now high-jack the process to once again exclude youth interests and voices. As well as resisting the "stodginess" of the bureaucratic upper layers of the Brotherhood itself (Lynch, 2007: 1)[5], they joined with other youth organisations to continue the revolutionary process by constantly protesting for expulsion of old regime cronies from the institutions of the former regime, including for example the media, the university administrations, local councils, labour unions and professional syndicates, determined that the uprisings should not end in simply a rotation of regime elites. New youth-based political parties and free-floating organisations which assume a lobbying rather than a civil society format, indicate Egyptian youth are leading the way in consolidating their new-found political self-awareness. Likewise in Tunisia, the somewhat less organised youth initiated a second wave of protests in February 2011, co-ordinated with labour unions and civil society organisations, to maintain pressure on the post-Ben Ali regime to expel all those who had been part of his government and to ensure that a root-and-branch overhaul of the entire political system took place rather than the simple removal of the dictator.

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[5] See reference to an interview with Khalil al-Anani, a researcher on the Muslim Brotherhood, in Lynch (2007). Al-Anani identifies this bureaucratic "third generation" of Muslim Brotherhood leaders and I have borrowed Lynch's wonderful term to describe them.

This youthful rejection of entire systems and the structures and institutions which sustain them is neatly summed up in the mission statement on the Bahrain Youth for Freedom Facebook page: "We are a group of Bahraini youth, both shia and sunni, calling on the Bahraini people to unite on February 14th in demanding their rights and to overcome their differences. *We know the game: its time to change the rules*" (Itallics added) (Bahrain Youth for Freedom, 2011).

Secondly, even as they struggle to transform protest politics into the institutional politics of a functioning democracy, youth activists continue to reject the impermeable ideological boundaries of the previous generations. They have forged rainbow coalitions and lobby groups, which draw in activists from diverse political parties , such as the Coalition of Youth Revolution in Egypt, the Tunisian Youth Movement, the Jordanian Democratic Youth Union and the Libyan Youth Movement. Members may simultaneously belong to political parties with ideological (or in the Bahraini case sectarian) inclinations, but these are no longer perceived to be legitimate obstacles to collaboration in pursuit of solutions to shared problems. The narrative may be political, but it is not ideological.

Finally, Arab youth are not unique in articulating a generational narrative of impatience with the failures of authoritarian political structures and economic inequalities. Throughout the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, the youth movements not only communicated with one another to offer advice and support, but they also drew heavily upon the resources of youth movements elsewhere. Famously, April 6th activist, Mohamed Adel, was trained at the Center for Applied Non-violent Action and Strategies. CANVAS, as it is known, was formed by former student activists who had led a non-violent revolution against Slobodan Milosevic and who were eager to export their model to youth activists elsewhere. Adel brought the strategies and techniques of CANVAS back to the April 6th and Kefaya movements, much as youth leaders from Georgian, Burmese, Belarusian, Zimbabwean and nearly fifty other countries have taken the ideas home (Rosenburg, 2011). Unlike conventional democracy-promotion strategies which seek to build capacity in established CSOs and opposition parties, CANVAS emphasises the idealism, energy and autonomy of youth.   The exchange of ideas, the translation of CANVAS documents into Arabic, and their promotion across the Arab region has continued ever since.

Similarly Arab youth activists have been prominent in global youth online forums like Movement.org, the forum of the Alliance for Youth Movements, or

GlobalVoices Online. TakingITGlobal has established an Arabic Youth for Change forum, co-hosted by Bibliotecha Alexandrina, which also offers online tools and discussion spaces for Arab youth to exchange ideas, information, and support in their national political struggles with each other and with youth elsewhere. In short, Arab youth are not only linked into regional networks but into global networks which share both elements of their generational narratives and strategies for subsequent activism. Just as Arab youth's popular culture merges the local with the global, so too does their political culture. They are themselves now passing on the baton, with anti-government protests in Greece, Spain and even the United States, modelling themselves on the Arab Spring (Crumley, 2011; Hetton, 2011; Cala, 2011).

The connectedness between Arab and other international youth movements should perhaps not surprise us. Mannheim's notion of generational unity indicated that 'location' is not territorially defined. Just as the Arab nationalist movements of the colonial and post-colonial eras shared information and ideas with leftist, liberal and nationalist movements beyond the Arab region itself – an exchange based on the common social and historical 'location' of the time, so it inevitable that the process should repeat itself today. The deepening of global connectedness, not least in terms of communications technologies and the cultures they carry within them, make the bonds of common location more visible than ever before, while the expansion of global capital has created the conditions of that location.

Conclusion: Where next?

In a prophetic article published in November 2010, journalist Ramy Khouri wrote:

> Youth have broken through the barriers and constraints that kept them as silent and passive members of society, and may well soon start making practical contributions – private business and social movements in particular – that could gradually pull our region into the modern world. When youth activism intersects with politics, then we can expect real change to happen. That day may be imminent" (Khouri, 2010).

Indeed, it appears that the day has now come but, while the tyrants in Cairo, Tunis and Libya may be gone, it remains unclear how, or indeed if, the protest

movements which demonstrated the power of internet-savvy, democracy-hungry Arab youth will morph into formal and sustainable political actors in hopefully democratic constitutional political systems. The shared 'problems' of unemployment and inadequate education are unlikely to be resolved in the short to medium terms. Political freedom might over time engender broader social transformation but equally it might allow conflicting visions of national futures to re-surface in dangerous and destabilising ways.

Locating Arab youth in this uncertain future requires an inclusive approach, recognising the shared and traumatising experiences which are identifiers of, but not limited to, a specific age group whilst also understanding that youth is a dynamic social construction which is subject to powerful global cultural forces and which cannot be adequately summarised in terms of fixed points of entry and exit. Youth define themselves by their interests and aspirations, by a complex overlapping of identities which results in permeable and fluid boundaries. The area of convergence – the objectives which emerge from the generational narrative - can perhaps best be summed up by the iconic slogans of the Arab Spring: *hurriya, karameh, adaaala (*freedom, dignity and justice).

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