

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
Studying Youth in the Arab World
“Framing the Research Agenda” by Dr. Samir Khalaf

For the past year - in fact more because we are the center planning to host a conference on youth - I have been literally reading everything I can get my hands on, works done especially over the past decade beginning with the German Shell Foundation in Holland, the Institute of Study of Islam in Modern Society, again in Holland, the Social Studies Institute, also the Wolfensohn reports of the Brookings Institute, and I am glad we have somebody from the Dubai School of Government. All of these have issued periodic studies – in fact there is a periodical that is unfortunately going out of print, “ISM review” which is edited by Asef Bayyat that has periodically provided the sort of thing we’ve been hearing: focused empirical survey on various aspects of youth, not only in the Arab world but also in Asia. It is really a store house for me of the kind of information we need. I don’t have much time but what I would like to do is to raise three or four aspects or dimensions that could become resourceful for exploring the problems that IFI and the Goethe Institute are interested in.

The demographic bulge and its implications

To begin with, whatever study you open the first thing you are going to encounter is what is called the demographic bulk, and it has acquired that nomenclature because indeed the Arab world is one of the most youthful populations in the world. It depends on how you define youth; lately we are moving from youth to “young adults” so it extends beyond the usual definition of 15 or 18 and under, but whatever breakdown you take you are dealing with various countries where virtually 50% of the population – if you extend it to young adults it’s over 70% of the population – are in that age group. More significant perhaps, whereas the proportion of those who are young in other countries of the world has declined, it has not done so as yet in the Arab world. In fact, the disparity in many ways has become sharper and more striking in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, where young adults are almost twice the rates observed in other countries in the world. Obviously, as we will again discuss, these demographic dimensions are related to the shifts in the economy, to the resources and dramatic alterations in the economic situation especially of families and households. Along with this, the Arab world suffers from another inflated figure, the incidence of job seekers. In fact the projections of 2020 - all countries now with the international foundations are making projections of what is going to happen in 2020 – find that the rates continue to be alarming. What is peculiar about the Arab world, and this I discovered by looking at these figures, that it is the so-called “yuppies” of the Arab world who are suffering from this. In other words, it is the most educated, most skilled, the most urban, the most cosmopolitan young who suffer from high rates of unemployment. The disparity is even more striking when we look at young women, an aspect that has been totally overlooked in much of our work. It is the “yuppies” that are part of the exodus, of the brain drain; the implications of this are grievances. In other words, the people who are supposed to become the spearheads of change and development in policy and inventiveness are not with us anymore. Along with this, what is unique in some countries in the Arab world, especially Lebanon where much has been said about this in the public press and elsewhere, there is a skewed sex ration. It is the men who are leaving and hence this has affected the marriage market. The competition for the so-called scarce social capital in our society - the male - has led to all kinds of implications. Studies which some of my MA students have performed are very revealing. Sisterhood has disappeared in the Arab world. There is so much competition between young women to catch what Natasha Yasbeck said the so-called “*lakta*,” the catch in our culture has led to kinds of competition which is really unrivaled.

One can say a lot about this because it has all kinds of implications on moral sexual modesty and what is associated with it.

Perceptions on youth, perceptions of youth

In addition to this demographic bulge, what I find missing in the literature, and I see one or two papers here beginning to fill the gap, is that we know a lot about secondary data about youth but we know very little about how youth represent and conceive themselves. Here, in my own work, I am making a distinction between three layers: the way the youth is conceived by the upper channels in society, the way it is perceived by their own subculture, and also and more important the way it is lived. So at all these three levels we have disparities that are very interesting and affect much of the policy research that we could conduct. In other words, because of the shifting moral politics at home and the unsettling forces of globalization it has compounded this junction between the way ideologically we perceive the youth and the way they perceive, think, and define themselves. Hence, we find two dissonant perceptions in the literature: on the one hand, we celebrate them as the hopes and builders of the future. Every commencement address I hear we always celebrate the young as the hope of the future. Yet, they are stigmatized; they are often feared as the disruptive parasitic sources of chaos, disorder, and flagrant abuse and misuse of the moral arbiters in society. So we have to really bridge this dissonant conception.

The Tripod

When we look at the work in the Arab world we see a tripod. On one hand more young people retreating from their families. This is a very important problem. In my own work for the past half century, every social scientist I have read about the Arab world says this is a kinship culture where the family is the basic unit, the security blanket, the cushion. What happens when this basic, fundamental pillar in society begins to disappear? This is what the young are facing and it has generated a lot of social hypocrisy. We pay deference for the family but the family is not a relevant body that young people are listening to. We have to focus on this junction between generations of youngsters who are facing a diminished role of the family, whose attachment to the family is only surface-deep. I meet my student and talk with them; I ask them where they go when they have a problem. The description I get is almost very vivid, they hug, they kiss, they eat, they celebrate with the family but the family is often, other than being an economic source of security, irrelevant to their lives. So the family in the Arab world is not the haven in the heartless world that we as social scientists celebrated. I say this and I also begin to distinguish in my own work between autonomy and empowerment. Autonomy is very important for the young, it makes them feel better. They feel at ease when they are with these kinds of cushions, but this is not where change is going to begin. Although the family is psychologically a source of autonomous support, it is not where empowerment is going to be realized. This is why I am lately beginning to talk about the family as perhaps the most dramatic form of false consciousness in the Arab world. We have two forms of false consciousness: religion (people take refuge in religion as a ritual) and consumerism. But lately, the family is beginning to be a ritual we celebrate openly while deep down it is not making much difference in addressing the real psychological problems that the young are facing. They are not only retreating from the family, but they are also getting estranged: their rupture with the state is even more dramatic.

Second, the young are obviously disaffected by politics. Although the state is a source of employment and security in most of these especially repressive regimes, it has become increasingly defective in responding to the particular needs of the young. Read any literature written by the young, any of their narrations, all these dreams of democracy, transparency, accountability, justice,

well-being, these are not addressed by the state. Hence, this disaffection with the state and state ideologies is again another problem that we have to account with.

What is left today, and perhaps most striking for the first time, is the street. The street has emerged as the most interesting, the most adventurous place to observe if you want to see what the youth are doing. There's a whole group in Algiers called "Haitist" (from the word "Hait," who support the wall). Almost 45% of the unemployed people in Algiers are not singing pop music, going to the mosque, or participating in street demonstrations but they are idly supporting the wall. How youth perceive their own alienation, their own marginalization, and how they act on this disaffection is very important. We have to learn how to address this, we have to get it from the horse's mouth; little research so far is based on this.

Between tradition and modernity

In brief, today the young are caught between a poignant and unsettling predicament. They're drawing away from the traditional pillars of support and well-being but they are not attracted as yet. There is push from traditional sources of solidarity but they are not yet attracted by the "modern" and "post-modern" alternative sources of education, employment, security, public opinion. This is not new as there has always been generational conflict. If you read the so-called generations of the 1930s and 1940s, they too were disenchanting - especially in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Palestine - by the failures of the notables. All you have to read is the work of Philip Khoury and others on what happened in Damascus in *Bilad el Sham* and in Egypt during the struggle for the mandate; hence the state failed in addressing the real issues in the post-mandate and post-colonial period. Our own generation of the 60s faced the *Nakba*, the *Naksa*, and the failure of Arab regimes to cope. What I am saying is that we have to reverse the basic question. When I look at the tone of the literature, it's almost always framed by how and why the young are a problem and why they have become a nuisance to us. In fact, economists who speak of exclusion talk about the young as parasitic, "we invest so much in them yet they are not giving anything in return." This is why we ought to shift the question: why we have become a problem and a nuisance to the young? I don't mean it in a flippant way: the worst indictment is seen in students work; there is a constant theme in student narrations whereby they believe that they would be better off elsewhere. This is, in fact, the worst indictment when the so-called 50% of our population feel that they are less than what they should've been or could've been had their system been different. One of my favorite economists, Robert Hirshman at Princeton University, wrote a fascinating book 20 or 30 years ago called "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty." As an economist he was mostly concerned about what happened in the economic system when the resources don't meet expectations: You exit, you get out. If you cannot exit, you use your voice to criticize, to curse. If neither of those options are present, like they are in the Arab world, you can't exit anymore. Look at what happened in Gaza, look at what is happening in Syria and Saudi Arabia. You can't even use your voice; can you dare to demonstrate in any of those regimes? If these two options are not available to the young they are faced with a third, more difficult problem: how to rearrange their loyalties. Hence the young are gripped by a more difficult task of redefining themselves in a culture and society that is not meeting their basic needs for autonomy and well-being.

Shifting moral entrepreneurs

The third problem that is emerging in the literature, and unfortunately I see a bit of it here in one or two of the article, is how the young are negotiating meaningful collective identities that allow them to live with risk and uncertainty. In other words, how are they forging relevant collective identities in dark times? Such uncertainties are being compounded today by unresolved and contested local,

regional, and global transformations. I talk to my students about their careers, what they want to study, whom they want to marry, whom they want to live with. Who are the moral entrepreneurs of the young today? Whom do they listen to? Whose ideas they incorporate as role models? Just witness the day-to-day situations they face, the divergent cultural scripts. Who do they listen to when they wake up in the morning? Do they listen to the Sheikh? The state? The national secular ideology? The family? The peer? The popular subculture? In the work we did on sexuality we found that many of the young in the Arab world today define their basic source of information as none of the above. It is the chat room. Many people are acquiring their basic ideas, not only about what to do in bed with a woman, but the perception of themselves and their lifestyles online. This is essentially something that didn't exist in our own generation.

In brief, we are facing a textbook instant of anomy at all levels. The young are living a dissonant life because they cannot incorporate the scripts they hear and hence there is a discrepancy between the normative expectations and how they are living it. This is why, as I'll argue later, the young, especially young women, suffer from this. The young women, as the research we did indicates, are caught between two realities they can't set aside: they live in a culture where they have to be sexually attractive and sexually appealing. You have to look at the media and the thriving industry of the facelift and refashioning the erotic image of the body to realize how important this is. Yet these very same poor creatures, if they are celebrated for being sexually attractive, they are cursed and condemned if they become sexually active. One of my students is conducting a study on the toilet graffiti in AUB and what she is discovering there is fascinating. There is a difference between what men and women write on the walls of their bathrooms. Men are obsessed with politics; on the bathroom walls they are cursing political leaders. The girls are sending sexual, erotic messages all the time. The most private sanctuary in our world has then become a place the young have to use because they have no other venues where they can discuss issues. When people are afraid and uncertain, when people as Beck and others tell us are living in a society of risk, where do they take shelter? Here, I part company with Milan Kundera's unbearable lightness of being. Kundera was telling us that this state of limbo is unbearable. I don't think so; I think at this stage in the Arab world people are still in transit, in a state that they can be redirected elsewhere. But so far the responses are a typical textbook example of what happens when you are afraid, the 3 Fs. You either freeze, and many young have frozen, they don't want to react or redefine. Or they take flight; what is interesting is where they are taking flight. This is where much of the flights so far have been in areas where we re-invent, the earlier bubbles that we were running away from. Hence the community, sect, and the smaller bubbles have become sharper than they used to be during my generation. Finally, and this is why discussing youth becomes very important, how are youth fighting? How are they resisting? In what areas can they begin to question these inconsistent images and messages they hear outside?

The post-modern fluidity

My generation did not suffer from this. We were living in what all the literature calls a moment of modernity. We knew exactly where we found meaning and the directions our lives were taking. My father was 50 years older than I was but I listened to him. When I came to AUB, all the professors were relevant to me, even those whose ideas I didn't like, but I did not question their enthusiasm and exuberance for what they are doing. Unfortunately, many youngsters in AUB – this presumable epitome of excellence in the Arab world – are disenchanted with the quality of education they are receiving. They are also disenchanted with the quality of instruction they are receiving in their classes. But they are afraid to speak up. This is just the tip of the iceberg, that we have generations of young people who are disenchanted, disaffected by their surrounding but they don't have a voice

to say so. With modernity we had clear boundaries; there was no conflict in my time between what I heard in my community, what I heard from my elders, and what I experienced in the university and peer culture. But today, and for the first time, in the so-called post and late modernity the young are at risk because they are living in what is being called a situation of blurred boundaries. This is why I have found the work of three scholars exceptional. One of them is Bauman, almost 90 years of age, whose main theme is fluidity in the modern world. We live in a fluid culture and state where we don't know where this flow is going. Second, the German scholar Beck has written about risk society over the past three years. Recently, I re-read Foucault and I admired his work on how late modernity generates new forms of agency and new forms of resistance. These are the two cornerstones for the work on youth: how are they being activated as agency and how are they beginning to resist the conditions in their lives that make them worse than they could've been?

Hence, we live in what Beck calls deferred adulthood. More and more youngsters in the Arab world don't want to pass into the adult world. They would rather wait. My colleague Ghassan Hajj in Australia is doing a brilliant work on waiting; how much time people, especially the young, spend waiting. They are not just waiting for Godot, they are waiting because they are lost in this moment of transition. This is unique in the Arab world. It existed in our generation but its manifestations were different. This is why incidentally we should focus on the role of women and gender. This is where the problem is very striking for a variety of reasons.

Young Arab women as a focal point

Recent studies in the Arab world are beginning to reveal that young women today, more than men, are acquiring special roles. These roles are unique in the Arab world, both symbolically and materially, in the production and consumption of post-modern values. Do not belittle that. Every year, the proportion of women who graduate with distinction is getting larger. Some of my best students in class are women. They are the ones who are inventive and daring because they know what is ahead of them. They are, more than men, acting as the cultural entrepreneurs. They are the carriers of the new values I am talking about. By virtue of becoming more receptive to enjoying the new freedoms and choices which they never had before they are becoming more adept, and more women than men are becoming self-makers. More women than men are becoming more resilient, flexible, and innovative. Let me give two striking examples: I live in Saifi Village and virtually 98% of all the activities in Saifi - be it in the area of design, graphics, galleries, art, fashions - are monopolies of women. They are part of the young generation of women who can tell you stories and we're doing studies, narrations, of what they're doing what they're doing. The work is really very inventive. I shift from Saifi to Dahieh; what Lara Deeb and Mona Harb are doing in Dahieh is very interesting. Again, the women are using piety and religious foundations to become advocates in their subcultures, without essentially raising the eyebrows of others.

Youth exclusion and subcultures

Finally, how are the young reacting to this exclusion? This is the input of the German Shell Foundation as they've always been interested in how the young are socially, economically, and politically excluded and how they are reacting to it. The work on subculture is also important; what kinds of subcultures are emerging? In our work, we are focusing on 4 such obvious subcultures. First, those who continue to see in militancy, in street violence, the answer. Here we will have work on what is happening in Tripoli, on Hizbullah, work derived from interviews with people who at one point were involved in such activities. Second, political movements of collective action such as revolutions that generated all kinds of hope of change and then somehow disappeared. Third, advocacy in the work of civil society and welfare, and this is where many of the interesting

grassroots things are taking place. Finally, the cyber-culture. The work is extended now to three particular areas: Iran, Turkey, and Morocco. In these three areas, if you look at the literature, you will find immense empirical work on what Bryan Edwards calls the cyber-culture. Asef Bayyat's work on the politics of fun in the Arab world and Swedenburg's work on Egypt are important to mention here. I have also recently heard of a popular film in New York called "Takwa Core" (piety and hard core) about a group of black Islamists who used popular rock and Koranic passages as a way to reach out. Popular Islam should not be seen as taking shelter in the nostalgia of the past but as bridging and reconciling the elements of the post-modern and the traditional.