



Scholars Roundtable Tackles Arab Youth Identities and Values

According to leading experts in the region, “the youth agenda is one of the agendas that is not framed abroad – it is framed within the same context in which it is analyzed and studied.”¹ Recently at a roundtable in Dubai on the theme of youth identities and values, organized by the Issam Fares Institute and UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, in collaboration with the Dubai School of Government, experts concurred that addressing the question of how young people see themselves and their place in the world requires indigenous researchers to take the lead, working in partnership and collaboration with colleagues around the world. These experts are professors and researchers from universities across the region, including the United Arab Emirates University, University of Bahrain, American University in Cairo, American University of Beirut, Dubai School of Government and Mohammed V University in Morocco.

The question of youth identities and values is a complex one that has not been addressed consistently throughout the region. The challenges facing youth in the region are three-fold: (1) education (2) poverty and (3) governance. Combined together, these challenges are withholding the assets that would allow this generation to act as an integrated citizenry and that would produce new intellectual, political and economic leaders who can respond to the challenges of the era. While policy circles concede that there is now a political will to address these challenges, few studies shed light on this ever-changing, multi-layered reality: what adolescents and youth believe in, their value profiles, their world view orientations, what identities they endorse, and what groups they affiliate with.

With the advent of industrialization, urbanization, universal education, and the wide availability of consumer goods and services, including information and communication technologies, the horizon of young people’s imaginations is expanding and enabling them to imagine, develop and express multiple selves as well as multiple values. Three generations ago, the horizon of their imaginations did not extend beyond the boundaries of their home town or village; identity was largely based on the family, clan,

¹ *Phase II Thematic Roundtable: Identities and Values*, organized by IFI and UNICEF MENA RO, hosted at the Dubai School of Government, February 8, 2010. Participants included: Christine Assaad, Mhamed Biygautane, May Al Dabbagh, Paul Dyer, Tarik Yousef, Abdul-Khaleq Abdullah, Amber Haque, Ebtisam Al Kitby, Hessah Lootah, Suaad Zayed Al-Oraimi, Rima Sabban, Baqer Salman Al-Najjar, Driss Guerraoui, Sulayman Khalaf, Shereen El-Feki, Charles Harb, Rami Khouri, Zina Sawaf, Vivian Lopez and Marilena Viviani.

or tribe.² Young people married early, traveled rarely, and completed secondary education at most, taking on adult responsibilities by their late teens. Young women by and large took on the role of raising the family.

Today, young people are subscribing to more transnational and individualized identities. Researchers are speaking of an individualized religiosity that is increasingly de-linked from religious institutions and increasingly tied to such avenues of dissemination and mobilization as the internet and satellite TV.³ In focus group discussions with young people, they repeatedly admit to living a double-life, expressing a different “self” online. Adolescents and youth are blending cultural forms to express themselves and are reconciling seemingly contradictory identities. Their identities are “situational,” complex and multi-layered, requiring updated and innovative methods of study.

Identities

Recent survey findings from across the region indicate that young people espouse first and foremost a religious identity. In a nationally representative survey of 2000 youth between the ages of 18 and 30 in Jordan, religious identity is the primary identity.⁴ In Morocco, 67% of respondents in a 1000-person survey felt they are more similar to Afghani Muslims than to Moroccan Jews or Palestinian Christians. This finding cuts across all age groups of the sample.⁵ With the absence of previous studies on youth identities allowing for a comparative perspective, some researchers have not concluded whether this turn to religious identity is new.

However, according to a national survey conducted during December 2009 in Lebanon, the most highly endorsed identities among youth between the ages of 18 and 25 are the family and country, according to IFI-UNICEF research led by Charles Harb.⁶ Their identity profile does not vary according to gender; however, it differs significantly across religious sect and region/governorate. Young Christians in Lebanon, including Maronites and Orthodox Christians, endorse more regional and nationalist identities than their Muslim counterparts. The latter endorse more Arab-Islamic identities. Youth from the

² Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation of Saudi Arabia* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs: 2000) 5.

³ Rachid Jarmouni, “Al-tahhawolat al-qiyamiya bil maghreb: al-shabab namouzajan” (The transformations of values in Morocco: Youth as an Example) *Idafat* (Autumn 2009) 165-166.

⁴ Musa Shteiwi, “Al-shabab al-ordoni: al-itijahat wal qiyam wal tasaworat” (Jordanian Youth: Attitudes, Values and Expectations) Jordan Center for Social Research. Submitted to the Ministry of Social Development (January 7, 2009)

⁵ Jarmouni 164.

⁶ Charles Harb, *Values and Identities: A National Survey of Youths in Lebanon*, Slide 45 of 50, PowerPoint presented at the Phase II Thematic Roundtable: Identities and Values, Dubai School of Government, February 8, 2010.

governorate of the north are more sectarian and more nationalistic than their counterparts in the governorates of Mount Lebanon, the south and Nabatieh.

Accordingly, future studies should explore the following questions, broadly:⁷

- What are the identities endorsed by Arab youth?
- Are identities relationally defined (family, tribe, geography)?
- Are identities more collectively ascribed (national, pan regional, pan religious etc.)?
- Are there identity profile similarities and differences between and within Arab countries?
- Is it possible to cluster Arab youths' identity profiles by region, by state, or within state?

With the influx of foreign migrant workers, especially in countries of the Gulf region, close attention should be paid to identity markers, such as dress and language. How do young locals actively differentiate themselves from the expatriate community? What are the identity markers they draw on to make this distinction? Moreover, how do young people differentiate themselves from the rest of the adult population?

Social scientists in the United Arab Emirates, in particular, are lamenting the rapidly diminishing knowledge and use of Arabic language among the national youth cohort. They warn this may result in a loss of their sense of pride in their own culture.⁸ The “challenges” to identity in this instance do not arise from the predominance of foreign domestic workers in the Emirati household, but from national policies, namely education policy and specifically the privatization of education.⁹ The use of Arabic is waning at institutions of higher education, in addition to vocational schools; in some cases, the language is strictly forbidden from being spoken in the classroom. In addition, the textbook used for Arabic instruction in secondary public schools has not been updated since 1972, making it difficult for younger Emiratis to engage with and enjoy learning the language.

The ‘abaya and the dishdasha have had a similar trajectory in recent Gulf history; while in the 60s and 70s, the young generation wore secular and “modernized” dress, today “traditional” dress has returned across all cohorts of society. This cannot be understood as an indication of conservatism; rather, the ‘abaya and dishdasha indicate the social background of young men and women. Different styles and materials are combined, including stretch material, baseball caps, and the location of embroidery on the ‘abaya, and effectively express different identities and value profiles. Moreover, by wearing a

⁷ These questions are drawn from Charles Harb’s proposal submitted to IFI-AUB, August 24, 2009.

⁸ *Phase II Thematic Roundtable: Identities and Values*, Dubai School of Government, February 8, 2010.

⁹ *Phase II Thematic Roundtable: Identities and Values*, Dubai School of Government, February 8, 2010.



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distinctly national and local dress, today's young generation is "showing the 'outsiders' who the 'insiders' are."¹⁰

Values

The rise in religious identity among youth is matched by a rise in religious values. This religiosity is becoming less institutional and more individualized. In Jordan, at least half of youth pray regularly, while more than 60% participate in other rituals, including fasting. At least 75% of youth would not agree to their children marrying from another faith.

In Lebanon, survey findings show that youth are moderately religious and less so than the national mean.¹¹ The recent national survey cited above indicates that young Lebanese mostly endorse emic values, those values which are specific to their culture, including hospitality, generosity, honourable behaviour and dignity, followed by security (safety, harmony and stability of society, relationships) and self-direction and achievement.¹² While these preferences do not vary according to gender, they vary across region/governorate. Young Lebanese in the governorate of Mount Lebanon are less traditional and more hedonistic than their counterparts in the Beqaa. Youth in Beirut are similarly more hedonistic than their counterparts in the governorates of the North and the Beqaa.

Family is still central in the lives of young people but the latter have increasingly more influence on decision-making within the family, especially young women as they become more educated and more successful. In particular, young people are weighing in more on household material and economic decisions. Emic values are the most preferred across Arab countries.¹³ Three sources of values exist in the Arab region: 1) religion, which directs manners, or "akhlaq," 2) family and education, which direct day-to-day social values and 3) the state and its laws, which define what is legally permissible and impermissible.

Accordingly, new studies should explore the values and attitudes of youth towards the state and market, which are gradually supplanting the family as a source of education. Moreover, religiosity and its various forms – individual vs. collective, national vs. transnational – should be studied more rigorously, allowing for comparative studies within and across countries.

¹⁰ *Phase II Thematic Roundtable: Identities and Values*, Dubai School of Government, February 8, 2010.

¹¹ Harb Slide 46 of 50.

¹² According to a value-types instrument validated in representative samples from Lebanon and Iraq, and in samples from over 200 samples in 67 nations.

¹³ *Phase II Thematic Roundtable: Identities and Values*, Dubai School of Government, February 8, 2010.

Key Implications

Methodology Implications

- Similar instruments and scales should be used in order to generate comparable data on youth identities and values across Arab countries.
- Social and “ethnic” borders should be used to survey young populations rather than official state borders.
- Statistical and quantitative methods should be combined with qualitative methods, including participant observation, in order to explore how youth construct their identities in everyday life.

Policy Implications

- Studies on identities and values may have effects on public discourse, by exacerbating stereotypes of different youth cohorts and influencing inter-societal perceptions and tensions.
- A loss in the sense of pride in their culture, and dramatic changes in their identities and values, may result in extreme and perhaps violent reactions and rejection of the “other.”
- Good governance and social and political participation would ensure that Gulf societies have a say in education policy and other major decisions that affect identity development among their youth cohorts.
- A vision and decision by the leaderships in Gulf societies are required to maintain economic and migration openness, while working towards “integrating” and “understanding” rather than only “preserving” youth identities and values.