Is "Youth" Being Addressed in Important and Distinctive Ways in Middle East Studies? (posed by Fida Adely)

Pensée 1: Youth and Generational Renewal in the Middle East

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Certain conditions of the contemporary period are bringing to the fore a shifting regional politics in which today's young people, the most numerous and educated generation in history, are recognized simultaneously as critical objects and agents of change.[1] Youth in the Muslim Middle East are struggling to exert their youthfulness in the present and prepare for life transitions in the future in a context of ubiquitous neoliberal reforms, authoritarian regimes, and ongoing regional conflicts with no resolution in sight.[2] At the same time, due to their sheer numbers and the meteoric spread of ever mutating youth-led cultures and movements via horizontal spaces made possible by the new media and information and communication technology (ICT), youth embody a force of cultural regeneration.[3]

   The "question of youth," especially in the branch of Middle East studies that deals with international development and regional politics, tends to be addressed variously as a developmental challenge, a threat, and an opportunity. The challenge arises from the youth bulge manifest in middle- and low-income countries of the region and the daunting consequences it has for economic planning and social provisioning in health and education as well as other sectors. The Arab states contain among the highest regional average of young people in the world with 65 percent of the population under twenty-five years old, 20 percent of whom are in the fifteen to twenty-four age bracket. The Middle East and North Africa region holds the inauspicious distinction not only of being the fastest

growing labor force but also of having 25 percent youth unemployment (since the 1990s), the highest regional average and almost double the global average, which is 14 percent. In the next ten to fifteen years, some 100 million jobs must be created in the Arab states to absorb the emerging workforce.[4]

The threat derives from a supposition that youth, especially young men who are politically disenfranchised and lack outlets for formal political and economic participation, will likely resort to some combination of apathy, escapism through drugs or violence, or radicalization. The post-9/11 "war on terror" rhetoric, which is fading in the Obama era,[5] has been replete with assumptions about how poverty, democracy deficits, and unemployment present among the greatest threats to national and international security.[6]

These assumptions, however, have not been entirely corroborated by empirical evidence. The Gallup Center for Muslim Studies has produced groundbreaking data on the views of youth in the Middle East and North Africa region and Muslim world more broadly, thereby challenging some widely held ideas about youth dispositions and desires. According to the Gallup studies and other independent research, although a minority of youth may express opinions indicative of radicalization, the majority aspire for justice, opportunities, work, stability, and the ability to marry and form families.[7] Dina, a twenty-one-year-old university student in Egypt, sums up youth aspirations well when she explains that "the ambitions of young people are modest. We want to live at a decent level ['*alā mustawā karīm*], get a job, find love, and get married." These simple desires seem hopelessly out of reach for scores of young people.[8]

The inability of so many youth to find contentment in the present, to make the transition from school to work and from work to adulthood, clearly points to a situation of widespread generational discontent. However, another recurring theme in the policy literature is that the youth bulge poses a potential opportunity, a "demographic dividend"[9] or "demographic gift."[10] According to this reasoning, a proportionately large youthful population becomes an advantage when human-capital policies harness the energies of youth for a certain path of development.[11] Yet a shortcoming of measuring the value of youth through a human-capital framework, or one that looks primarily at the productive capacity of individuals, is that it privileges a neoliberal free-market model of economic development and does not adequately take into consideration issues of rights, equity, justice, citizenship, and aspirations of youth themselves. Youth tend to be treated more as objects than as agents of social and political reform and economic development.

The extended period of youth can indeed be viewed as an opportunity—but not in the way that is outlined in much of the development literature. This elongated waiting period between youth and adult life, although undoubtedly a period for many of anxiety and insecurity, boredom and withdrawal, and agitation and extremism, is also a period when the young forge a distinct generational consciousness.[12] In other words, the extended period of youth translates into more leisure time and provides opportunities, especially for schooled

urban youth, to exert themselves as citizens, consumers, and conduits of change through youth cultural political forms.[13] As legions of young people in the region use ICT and take part in and initiate youth-led movements,[14] as they spend more time among peers and bypass formal institutions and adult authorities, they experience horizontal forms of participation (an experience lacking in formal institutional structures, such as schools, which tend to be hierarchical and ageist). A generational consciousness emerging on practices of participation and converging on issues, broadly defined, of rights and justice seems to be the basis of social and cultural renewal.

How deeply youth leisure and cultural political activities can transform the social order toward social justice, equity, and livelihood opportunities is yet to be seen. However, there is little doubt that a new generational consciousness is in the making, and understanding and engaging youth should become an even more distinctive area for Middle East studies.

NOTES

[1]Linda Herrera, "What's New About Youth?" *Development and Change* 37 (2006): 1425–34; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), *World Youth Report 2005: Young People Today and in 2015* (New York: UNDESA, 2005).

[2]The young do not simply make up an age cohort with future potential; they are active social agents in their own right. As proponents of the "new social studies of childhood" emphasize, children and youth should be understood simultaneously as "beings and becomings," not merely as works in progress. See Jens Qvortrup, *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[3]For comprehensive coverage of these issues, see Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat, eds., *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global North and South* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[4]Ragui Assad and Ghada Barsoum, "Youth Exclusion in Egypt: In Search of 'Second Chances'" (working paper, Middle East Youth Initiative, Wolfensohn Center for Development and Dubai School of Government, 2007); World Bank, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2004).

[5]Lolita Baldor, "Under Obama 'War on Terror' Catchphrase Fading," Associated Press, 31 January 2009, http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090131/ap_on_go_pr_wh/war_on_terror (accessed 1 February 2009).

[6]Lionel Beehner, "The Effects of 'Youth Bulge' on Civil Conflicts," Council on Foreign Relations, 27 April 2007, http://www.cfr.org/publication/13093 (accessed 30 November 2008); Richard P. Cincotta, Robert Engelman, and Danielle Anastasion, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Population Action International, 2003); Gunnar Heinsohn, "Islamism and War: The Demographics of Rage," *Open Democracy*, 16 July 2007, www.opendemocracy.net (accessed 18 March 2008).

[7]See John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007); Magali Rheault and Dalia Mogahed, "Young Arabs Poised to Maximize their Potential," Gallup, Inc. 2009, http://www.muslimwestfacts.com/mwf/108028/Young-Arabs-Poised-Maximize-Their-Potential.aspx (accessed 25 March 2009); Brookings Institution, "Arab Youth between Hope and Disillusionment: Toward a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East," event summary, 10 November 2008, http://www.brookings.edu/events/2008/1110_arab_youth.aspx (accessed 28 March 2009).

[8]Linda Herrera, "Young Egyptians' Quest for Jobs and Justice," in Herrera and Bayat, *Being Young and Muslim.*

[9]World Bank, *World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation*, (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2007); *Egypt Human Development Report 2005: Choosing our Future: Towards a New Social Contract* (Cairo: UNDP and Institute of National Planning, 2005).

[10]Wolfsensohn Center, Brookings Institution, *From Oil Boom to Youth Boon: Tapping the Middle East Demographic Gift*, conference proceedings, 7 January 2008, http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/events/2008/0107_youth/20080107_youth.pdf (accessed 15 April 2008); Ragui Assad and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, "Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity of Challenge?" Population Reference Bureau, 2007, http://www.prb.org/pdf07/YouthinMENA.pdf (accessed 31 March 2009); Hillary Silver, "Social Exclusion: Comparative Analysis of Europe and Middle East Youth" (working paper, Middle East Youth Initiative, Wolfsensohn Center for Development and Dubai School of Government, 2007).

[11]There is evidence, for example, that the economic growth of the Asian "tiger" countries from 1960 to 1990 was possible in part because of education and economic policies that capitalized on the youth bulge and turned it into an advantage. World Bank, *World Development Report 2007*, 4–5.

[12]On global generations and generational consciousness, see Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham, *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2007); June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, *Generational Consciousness, Narrative, and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); idem, "Global Generations: Social Change in the Twentieth Century," *British Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 4 (2005): 559–77; Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952).

[13]Henk Vinken, "Young People's Civic Engagement: The Need for New Perspectives," in *Contemporary Youth Research: Local Expressions and Global Connections*, ed. Helena Helve and Gunilla Holm (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 147–57.

[14]There have been many instances of new youth cultural politics in the region. See Ted Swedenburg, "Imagined Youths," *Middle East Report* 245 (2007), http://www.merip.org/mer/mer245/swedenburg.html (accessed 20 March 2009); Joel Beinin, "The Militancy of Mahalla al-Kubra," *Middle East Report Online*, 29 September 2007, http://www.merip.org/mero/mero092907.html (accessed 31 March 2009); Samantha M. Shapiro, "Revolution, Facebook-Style," *New York Times*, 22 January 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html (accessed 23 January 2009).