THE Muslim WORLD
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Special Issue
The State of Middle Eastern Youth
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Introduction

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It has been nearly six years since the eruption of street protests in Tunisia and Egypt that would rapidly bring down the regimes in those countries, and inspire similar political demonstrations across the Middle East. The world watched these events unfold, gripped by the narrative of a young generation peacefully rising up against oppressive authoritarianism to secure a more democratic political system and a brighter economic future. The early hopes that these popular movements would end corruption, increase political participation, and bring about greater economic equity, quickly collapsed in the wake of the counterrevolutionary moves of the deep state in Egypt, the regional and international interventions in Bahrain and Yemen, and the destructive civil wars in Syria and Libya.

In this context, efforts by the region’s youth to forge a more positive future for themselves and coming generations has been subsumed by events, and efforts to forge constructive solutions to the long-standing economic challenges facing the region’s youth have largely been sidelined by more immediate concerns related to security and political stability. Still, youth across the region continue to struggle with the more personal fight to build an economic future as they enter adulthood. For many young people, this struggle has only become more acute in the difficult macroeconomic environment faced by many of the countries in the region. Finding real solutions to the economic constraints that shape the transition to adulthood in the Middle East remains as vital today as before the Arab Uprisings, when youth brought their economic frustrations to streets and squares around the region. Indeed, finding such solutions is perhaps the lynchpin for bringing stability back to the Middle East and building a more prosperous economic future for all of the people of the region.

In the wake of these developments, there is a need to go beyond examining the role of Middle Eastern youth in the post-2011 Middle East and to explore the diverse social, economic, and political contexts in which young Middle Easterners found themselves across the region. This special issue of the Muslim World studies the state of Middle Eastern youth, focusing on the ways in which their experiences continue to shape their worldviews and their priorities. The contribution of this special issue to the burgeoning
literature on Middle Eastern youth enhances our understanding of the lives of the young in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and examines Middle Eastern youth’s novel methods of mobilization and its regeneration of a new consciousness.

This introduction provides a foundational understanding to the demographic and economic context behind the rise of the large youth population in the Middle East and the resultant economic challenges that they have faced as a demographic cohort. It then turns to a synopsis of the succeeding articles and the deeper insights that each of these provide in terms of some of social, economic, and political challenges Middle Eastern youth contend with, and the ways in which they manage and respond to their environment.

The Rise of the Region’s Youth Bulge

Across the Middle East, countries have experienced a pronounced increase in the size of their youth populations over recent decades, both in total numbers and as a percentage of the total population. Today, the nearly 111 million individuals aging between 15 to 29 living across the region make up nearly 27 percent of the region’s population.1 This youth cohort is the product of an historical demographic transition, one marked by early high rates of fertility and population growth during the 1970s and 1980s, followed with a rapid decline in fertility seen across the region during the mid-1990s. As fertility rates declined, dependent child populations began to decline, reducing overall population growth rates but ensuring that the generation born during the 1970s and 1980s became an increasing share of the population.

Importantly, while the rise of the youth bulge is often viewed in the context of the challenges that it imposes on the existing political and social order, it can – and should – be viewed as an economic opportunity for the region as a whole. While the growth of the youth population imposes supply pressures on education systems and labor markets, it also means that a growing share of the overall population is made up of those considered to be of working age; and thus not dependent on the economic activity of others. In turn, this declining dependency ratio can have a positive impact on overall economic growth, creating a demographic dividend.2 The ability of a particular economy to harness this dividend, however, is dependent on its ability to ensure the deployment of this growing working-age population towards productive economic activity, and to create the jobs necessary for the growing labor force.

For the economies of the Middle East, seizing the opportunity offered by the potential demographic gift has proven a challenge. The initial youth bulge hit the region at the same time as global oil prices collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, driving oil-producing countries in the region to slash, and those dependent on strategic rents and workers’ remittances from oil-producing countries to implement drastic public sector reform programs and reductions in subsidies. These changes battered countries where a growing number of youth were graduating from school and entering the workforce. Moreover, these youth were transitioning from school to work with expectations built upon an implicit, long-established social contract wherein the population had come to depend on government subsidies and, importantly, the provision of public sector jobs, along with relatively high wages and non-wage benefits enjoyed by workers in that sector. Having invested in educations preparing them for government jobs, a growing number of the region’s youth found themselves adrift as they left school, unable to find employment and, in turn, to make other steps in their transition to independent adulthood, including marriage, housing and starting their own families.

At the time, diagnoses focused on the poor growth performance of the region’s economies in the context of lower oil prices and the need to diversify investment in job creating sectors. International organizations, such as the World Bank, focused policy recommendations on improving governance, reducing corruption, facilitating trade, and reforming business regulations for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to encourage growth in this job-creating sector. There was little focus at the time on the specialized needs and particular institutional obstacles facing youth in the economic marketplace. Yet, as high oil prices hiked back up and regional economies returned to high rates of economic growth during the 2000s, economies across the region failed to respond with the job creation needed to bring down youth unemployment. Overall youth participation in the labor market remained low as individuals, especially young women, opted out of the labor market rather than struggle to find work in a highly competitive labor market.

**Transitioning to Adulthood: An Institutional Failure**

In the mid-2000s, as regional aggregate youth population peaked as a share of population, with youth ages 15 to 29 accounting for over 30 percent of the total population. During this time, regional governments and international organizations alike began taking a closer look at the specific economic needs of the region’s youth and how policy and programs could be reworked to better enable youth economic inclusion in the region. This effort was driven by genuine concerns about the economic well-being of the region’s youth, as youth unemployment rates, for those between 15 and 24, rose to

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over 27 percent by 2010, or nearly 6.6 million unemployed youth. At the same time, mounting concerns about potential linkages between the economic frustrations of youth, particularly young men, and political instability pushed this effort. Finding a means by which to create jobs for the region’s youth and to enable greater economic inclusion for youth more widely became a policy priority and increasingly garnered the attention not only of governments and international organizations, but also partnering non-governmental organizations and the private sector.

At the same time, researchers, like those working under the Middle East Youth Initiative, began exploring more deeply the microeconomic determinants of youth economic outcomes and the drivers of youth economic behavior in the context of the growing youth bulge. This work increasingly focused on interrelated, multi-sectoral issues facing youth in terms of education, labor markets, housing and marriage, and the institutional norms that continued to effect poor outcomes for youth even in the context of higher rates of economic growth and an improved macroeconomic environment.

**Educational Attainment and Skills Mismatch**

While countries across the region had made tremendous strides in bolstering rates of educational attainment within their populations, particularly for young women, educational outcomes have not provided youth with the skills sought out by private sector employers in the region. Importantly, the continued attractiveness of the public sector and the job security found therein has ensured that youth are incentivized to invest in schooling aimed at securing such jobs, rather than in areas more relevant to the private sector. As such, core labor market institutions and market signals continue to work against efforts to improve educational outcomes in terms of aligning the skills of graduates with those skills sought within the private sector, including in particular vocational and soft skills. Beyond this, there remains a pressing quality problem in terms of educational outcomes in the region, with pedagogical methods remaining largely focused on rote memorization rather than applied problem solving and assessment methods.

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4 Here, unemployment refers to those between the ages of 15 and 24 who are actively engaged in efforts to secure work, and does not include older youth or the 40 million economically inactive youth ages 15–24 (both in and out of education).

**Labor Market Institutions and Regulations**

Governments across the region had taken efforts to reduce public sector hiring and wages during the 1990s. However, this did little to change the interest and expectations of new entrants who continued to be drawn to the job security and reputational benefits of public sector work. While opportunities in the public sector remain restricted, the lure of public sector employment and the benefits found therein have ensured that more educated youth tend to queue for such positions rather than seeking out employment in the formal private sector. For the increasing number of youth willing to explore options in the private sector, high-quality formal sector jobs remain difficult to secure for several reasons. Importantly, labor market regulations governing private sector hiring and firing decisions across the region remain fairly rigid. Facing significant restrictions on the ability to dismiss workers during ebbs in the business cycle or to redress productivity concerns, firms are wary of hiring youth with limited job experience and untested skills. Increasingly, job creation for youth has been found not in the formal sector, but in the large and growing informal sector in the region, where labor market regulations do not apply or are not enforced.

**Marriage, Family and Housing**

Poor labor market outcomes and longer stays in education ensured that young men and women across the region began delaying marriage, as they focused instead on cementing the basic foundations of their future economic lives. As noted by Dhillon et al, “A generation ago, marriage was both early and universal – 63 percent of Middle Eastern men in the mid- to late twenties were married. Today, in the Middle East, nearly 50 percent of men between the ages of 25 and 29 are unmarried.” Similar trends are seen among young women. While this delay is largely driven by the more significant time investments that youth are making in education, the ability to marry – in a society that maintains conservative norms regarding marriage and extramarital relationships – has been restricted by the ability of young men, in particular to secure quality jobs. Moreover, the continued cultural institution of mahr, dowry, in the context of arranged marriages has ensured that the costs associated with marriage remain high. These costs are only bolstered by strains in the housing market: in those countries where the rental market remains regulated in a way that enforces fixed rents, older, established renters are protected at the expense of new entrants, who face a limited supply of housing and high entry fees and rents. At the same time, youth do not have the access to financial markets that would enable them to leverage future earnings (particularly when unemployed or underemployed) to secure a mortgage.

**The Push and Pull of Migration**

Migration has always provided an important vent for labor market pressures in the Middle East. For the period between the 1970s and 1990s, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf in particular provided a rich source of employment for workers from Egypt, Yemen

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6 Middle East Youth Initiative. *Inclusion: Meeting the 100 Million Youth Challenge.* (Washington, DC: Wolfensohn Center for Development and Duhai School of Government, 2007)
and the countries of the Levant, while Europe had attracted young workers from North African countries due both to proximity and the legacy of colonial ties between France and the majority of North African states. With the collapse of intentional oil prices in the 1990s — as well as in the context of security concerns in the wake of the first Gulf War at the turn of the decade — the Arab states of the Persian Gulf no longer remained a source for jobs. As the regional economy rebounded in the 1990s, Arab workers in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf increasingly found themselves in competition with lower cost workers from the Indian subcontinent as well as young nationals in the context of the Gulf’s own youth bulge. Likewise, security concerns and growing nativism within Europe began limiting the flow of migrants from North Africa, a situation that has only grown more binding in the current context of security and related refugee flows.

All of these issues together highlighted the need for a structured, cross-sectoral approach to reforming the institutional norms that governed education, the employment market, housing, and even the marriage market. Indeed, countries experimented in the early 2000s with reforms and policy shifts in many of these areas. Jordan began piloting public school programs that engaged technology more deeply and sought to reform the pedagogical approach. Egypt and Morocco made largely unpopular changes to labor regulations that allowed for the use of fixed term contracts for new entrants, albeit stopping short of a full revamp of labor market regulations. Moreover, several countries, including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, developed youth development strategies; on paper, these created a structured, multi-sectoral approach to youth development but failed to be fully implemented in a sustainable way. Overall, however, the ability of regional policy makers to make significant strides in resolving the multi-sectoral economic challenges of youth were limited by resources and a lack of political will needed to move forward fundamental reforms.

**Youth Policy and Programs since the Arab Uprisings**

While collective youth frustrations with economic prospects reached a zenith with the uprisings of 2011, this has not been since matched by any renewed efforts at stimulating job creation and opportunity through any systematic reform efforts. Rather, governments have responded largely with either a heightened security response or, more widely, with a reactionary fiscal response. Rather than unlocking opportunities for the region’s youth through complicated but sustainable reforms, governments have sought to increase public funding, including strengthening subsidies, raising public sector wages and increasing public sector hiring. While such efforts have had a short-term impact of reducing the economic burdens faced by youth and regional populations as a whole, they double down on the terms of the social contract that already proved itself unable to sustain the economic needs of the region’s large youth population and, in doing so, reinforce the troubling dependence that young workers have on the state as a primary engine of job creation and

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7 For further discussion, refer to article two of this special issue.
economic opportunity. In the long term, this approach provides no sustainable solution to the economic needs of the region’s youth, particularly in a context of declining oil revenues and increasing macroeconomic challenges facing regional governments.

At the same time, programs designed by governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations have proliferated. However, there has been a notable shift in their focus over the past decade. Perhaps driven by a frustration with past approaches or an understanding of the insurmountable challenges of more comprehensive policy reforms that could stimulate job-creating economic growth, youth programs have increasingly focused on efforts aimed at redressing supply side challenges. Aiming at empowering young individuals to secure their own goals, collective efforts by the development community have increasingly focused on training in vocational and soft skills, job search skills, and efforts at job matching. On the other hand, there has been an increasing focus on entrepreneurship programs designed to enable youth to create their own economic opportunities. The social entrepreneurship movement has also swept the region in recent years, with young people across the region aspiring to deploy their own skills, innovative and non-traditional development perspectives, and the application of more sustainable business plans to resolve long-standing developmental challenges.

Indeed, the rise of a more entrepreneurial vanguard of youth is inspiring and holds long-term promise. However, the concentrated focus on skills development and entrepreneurship raises concerns as well. First, it is important to emphasize that such programs – whether focused on skills training or entrepreneurship – are being deployed with little existing evidence of their positive impact on labor market outcomes and economic benefit to youth. Secondly, without matched efforts at creating a facilitating environment on the demand side, training programs might help address the skills gap between youth and the formal private sector, but institutional rigidities within regional labor regulations and business regulations remain and will continue to limit private sector demand for, even more skilled, workers. Likewise, those youth setting out to forge their own opportunities as entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs are not operating in fully developed ecosystems that can support their efforts in a sustainable manner. Access to finance and more advanced approaches like angel investment and venture capital are not fully developed, and without needed reforms enabling small business development, including labor market regulations, young entrepreneurs will likely face the same challenges in growing their businesses faced by more traditional SMEs in the region. Without an effort to redress some of the core institutional norms that driven fundamental market signals and the choices of economic actors – both young new entrants and older established economic actors – even the most innovative programs will likely fail to deliver as designed or expected.

Finally, there is an issue of scale: even as the region’s youth population begins to decline as a share of total population, socio-economic pressures associated with this large demographic will remain a priority for the foreseeable future. The real needs for improved educational quality, large-scale job creation and broader economic inclusion remain. Moreover, many countries in the region – most notably Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen-have yet to reach the peak of their youth bulge and will only see the
challenges related to this youth population increase in coming years. And importantly, for these states, youth not only face the traditional burdens of a transition to adulthood, but they are facing these challenges in a state of conflict and upheaval that has fundamentally uprooted any sense of normalcy within this transition. This is particularly the case for the millions of youth who find themselves adrift as refugees, whether in Europe, the broader Arab world or the crowded camps of Jordan and Lebanon.

Moving Forward on the Promise of the Arab Uprising

The narrative provided above admittedly paints a dark picture of outcomes and prospects for youth in the Middle East. And for many if not most youth in the region, prospects have been difficult. This is particularly true for those struggling with the difficult economic environment that has followed the Arab Uprisings, as in Egypt, or for those gripped by the real violence and social upheaval seen in conflict states. That said, the message of this introduction should really be about the promise of the region’s large youth population. Together, the region’s youth represent a tremendous source of creativity, innovation and hard work. They are aspirational and driven to collectively forge a new future for the region. The key is finding a means of unlocking this potential. Moreover, putting the talents of the region’s large youth population to work in terms of tangible, productive economic activity provides the promise of a demographic dividend that it is not too late for the region to secure. Youth remain, in essence, the promise of a better economic future for the region as a whole. Securing this, however, will require a renewed focus on creating real solutions that enable young people to reach their full potential, a focus that will need to build on a deeper understanding of the socio-economic needs and aspirations of youth and the institutional barriers that continue to obstruct their progress.

This Special Issue

Although scholars have extensively studied various aspects of the youth bulge in the Middle East for the past couple of decades, since 2011 the renewed surge of interest in young people in the region has primarily been driven by questions relating to their behavior before, during, and after the Arab Uprisings. Much of the policy concern has been leveled at the pre-existing causal factors that might have instigated the active participation of young Middle Easterners in the uprisings seen across the region. This special issue broaden the field of study by providing a few selected articles that provide an in-depth analysis of some of social, economic, and political challenges Middle Eastern youth contend with, and the ways in which they manage and respond to their environment.

By design, the contributions in this special issue tackle a selective and limited number of topics, and provide focused case studies that adopt different perspectives and disciplinary lenses in their analyses. Together, these articles provide a more comprehensive view on the major constraints faced by Middle Eastern youth, in critical areas such as social and political exclusion, education, and employment. This special issue is divided into two thematic parts. The first part elaborates on the idea of how Middle Eastern
societies need to address youth exclusion as a whole, and provides a series of papers that originally reflect on this theme within the education system, during the transition of young people from school to employment, and their eventual integration into the labor market using new sets of data and original frameworks of analysis.

The second part of the special issue sheds light on the effect of this exclusion on youth behavior, politics, economics, and identity. At a time when the Middle East is experiencing incredible volatility, and producing an exodus of youth who voluntarily migrate or are forcibly displaced, it is also important to follow young people’s trajectories at home and away. The second section of this journal issue sheds light on the dilemmas of identity and belonging that young Middle Easterners contend with both at home and in countries they have migrated to.

The initial thematic section of the special issue opens with a broad examination of the dimensions of youth exclusion in the Middle East. Hillary Silver discusses the general problem of youth exclusion, and assesses ways to promote their full social inclusion as they age. Since Middle Eastern youth begin life as “outsiders,” Silver considers how to eliminate the structural and institutional obstacles that resist Middle Eastern youth’s integration in their respective countries’ social, political and economic spheres. Given the multiple domains from which Middle Eastern youth are excluded, Silver identifies trajectories of social inclusion, knitting together transitions to adulthood in economic, social, cultural and political realms of life.

The contributions that follow Silver’s examine the broader institutional and regional contexts within which Middle Eastern youth transit from “outsiders” to contributors to the social, political and economic mechanics of their states. Samar Farah examines “The State of Education in the MENA Region and its Implications for Youth.” In her article, Farah sheds light on the education system in the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa by exploring data presented in international assessments in recent years. She focuses on three levels of analysis—school, teacher, and student levels—in order to better understand the challenges facing the education systems, and their implications on youth living in the region. Edward Sayre builds on Farah’s article by examining the influence of the educational levels of individuals and their parents on their ability to secure employment after leaving school. Using both non-parametric, Kaplan Meier, and parametric approaches, Sayre assesses the different roles family background plays in the case of women compared to men. He also addresses the issue of inequality of opportunity and its impact on educational achievement and attainment, as well as labor market outcomes.

The second part of this special issue starts with Manata Hashemi’s examination of aspirations, poverty and behavior among youth in the Middle East. She assesses the social conduct of poor youth in the Middle East from the perspective of aspirations-bounded rationality. From this vantage point, the behaviors of poor youth are not determined by individual economic interests or by pure emotions, but by their aspirations. Hashemi proposes that these youth struggle and create strategies to improve their lives that are conditioned by experience and observation of those who inform their social worlds. Michael Robbins sharpens the discussion on the role of experiences and observation in
influencing Middle Eastern youth’s views. He explores the role of experiences by examining the process of political learning among youths, specifically in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia. He compares the experiences of youth in these two countries, which experienced dramatic changes after the Arab Uprisings, showing how experiences have influenced Egyptian and Tunisian youth’s political, economic, and religious views.

The final contribution by Sherine El Taraboulsi leads the discussion beyond the premises of the Middle East to shed light on the state of British-Libyan youth, who originally left Libya for various social, economic and political reasons, in the United Kingdom. El Taraboulsi investigates the discourse on immigration in the United Kingdom, and its implications on the sense of belonging of British-Libyan youth, especially at a time of social and political upheaval in the Arab world and intense debate on immigrants in the United Kingdom. In exploring this issue, El-Taraboulsi unpacks topics related to faith, ethnicity and citizenship of Libyan youth in diaspora.

Collectively, these articles highlight the diversity of social, economic and political constraints faced by youth across the region and beyond. They also reflect on how these constraints and challenges along with experiences influence Middle Eastern youth’s aspirations and behavior; political and economic views; and identity and social cohesion. Six years after the Arab Uprisings, and the region is still amidst critical transfigurations shaking the foundations of its states on various levels. The repercussions of the 2011 uprisings have influenced Middle Eastern youth’s experiences providing impetus for questioning perennial sacred beliefs and positions, and forging ahead avant-garde views and responses to the constraints they face.

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