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Youth and the Arab Spring: Same demands and different paths

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Introduction:

The role played by Arab youth in the protest movements that started in 2010 is undeniably pivotal in steering the wheel for change towards democratic transformation in countries of the region. However, in their pursuit for democratic transformation, Arab youth were met by multiple challenges and drawbacks that influenced the fulfillment of their demands on the ground. Most analysts divide the "Arab Spring" into waves the first wave that started with Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, etc. Moreover, the second wave that started with Algeria, Sudan and Lebanon. In both waves, the role of youth was crucial in the movement, which highlights the significance of studying their role in both waves, and how it was played and the difference and commonalities between them. In the light of that, this paper is trying to explore briefly the role played by Arab youth in the movement. In addition to the main features of it in both waves as well as the main challenges, they encountered, trying to portray at the end future scenarios for the role of youth in the coming period.

Arab youth an overview:

According to estimates of the United Nations, one out of every five persons in the Arab Region is between 15-24 years old and more than half of the population is below the age of 25.¹



Since 2011, uprisings and social protests have affected several Arab countries, and a number have fallen into protracted conflict. The year 2011 was a tipping point: since then, the momentum for change has been unstoppable, and a new epoch began unfolding in the region. The protests that took place across several countries and began

spreading in 2011 underline the significance of the Arab region's youthful demographic profile. Never before, has the region had such a large share of youth; youth of ages 15–29 make up around 30 % of the population, or some 105 million people. Rapid population growth has placed massive pressures on societies and the entire infrastructure of Arab States. Moreover, The Arab uprisings have underlined the economic and political exclusion of many youth who have been denied influence over the public policies affecting their lives.

¹ Regional Overview Youth in the Arab Region-Western Asia, <https://bit.ly/2RIzo8q>

Citizens of the Arab region in general and the youth in particular are lightly represented in the public space. Thus, the recent youth-inspired protests and revolutionary movements represented an expression of the frustration and alienation of the current generation of youth. Disenchanted with the narrow choices society offers and stifled in a restrictive public sphere, youth in Arab countries were looking elsewhere for room to breathe. Their eyes were on the free streets beyond the family and nation, the camps of those who seek to become militant heroes, and on the enticing social activism of Islamist movements. Which was proven not the case with the uprisings of 2011 have shown, these youth were completely different from that.²

One of the main features of this new generation of youth is that they presented new patterns of participation and involvement, which went beyond the conventional channels of participation that were closed before them³. Ahead of the Arab Spring in 2011, most youth relied on cyber activism using different social media outlets in order to express their views and demands and engaging with the public and political life in their countries. This also opened a window for pan-Arab communication among the different youth actors across the region. This was vivid in both waves, for instance the close communications between Tunisian and Egyptian youth in 2011 and sharing their experiences in the protest movements. This was also the case with Sudanese and Lebanese youth in 2019, in which youth engage in wide discussions on social media to share experiences of their movements and tactics on the ground.

Furthermore, this virtual openness created for them a space to develop and discuss more profound thoughts on democracy and socioeconomic rights for example, that were different from the older generations and the conventional political actors in their countries. Hence, it justifies how they adopted new approaches in their trials to fulfill democratic transformation in the region.

² Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the prospects for human development in changing reality, UNDP, July 2017, <https://bit.ly/2xoQj9f>

³ Racha Mourtada & Fadi Salem, Social Media in the Arab World: the Impact on Youth, Women and Social Change, IEMED, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2Sb7uIE>

Arab Youth as a force of change:

While youth formed the catalyst of the Arab protest movement since 2011 in Tunisia. Given that they are the largest segment of population in Arab societies that witnessed a popular movements since the first wave in 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, in addition to countries that went through a profound reform movement such as Jordan, Morocco, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain. However, their representation in political institutions and power structures post the inception of the uprisings was and still is very limited and does not match their representation in the demographic structure of their societies nor their substantial role in Arab protest waves.



The Arab Spring was a significant moment for marginalized and vulnerable groups in the region- including youth - in the face of the authoritarian Arab state. The Arab spring acted as the glimmer of hope for the fall of authoritarianism. This state, in which regimes are based on the rule of power, which makes authority as an enemy to the people and transforms the state into a tool to defeat them instead of organizing their affairs.⁴

The situation regarding the development of the youth movement in the Arab region is quite similar in the different experiences. Firstly, in terms of the presence of strong protest youth movements such as the "Sixth of April Youth Movement" and "Youth for Justice and Freedom" in Egypt, the "February 20 Movement" in Morocco, the "Coordination for the Syrian revolution" in Syria and the "bloggers' networks" in Bahrain. Secondly, it showed that this generation is similar in its non-partisan and unconventional tools and methods that depended mainly on technology, used it, whether in coordination and networking among them or using satire against the regimes, and expanded the public space for accepting what is nonpartisan and unconventional methods of protest.⁵

This laid back the fact that the Arab Spring came as a surprise to the traditional Arab political organizations, as the Arab parties were absent from the early demonstrations. In Tunisia, for

⁴Ziad Majed, The State of Barbarism, Tuesday, May 29, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2RBGdZA>

⁵ For more, you can refer to: Mohamed el Agati et al, The younger generation in the Arab world and non-traditional means of participation: from the virtual field to the revolution, Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1st edition, 2013.

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example, the field leaders of the popular movement were youth demanding their social and political rights following the death of Bouazizi. In Egypt, the call to demonstrate came from the Facebook page of "We are all Khaled Said", that was followed by endorsement from the 6th of April movement, youth from "The national assembly for change" and "Youth for Justice freedom" movement. The same applies to Yemen and Syria, where youth were leading the protest scene. Although a segment of the youth who called for the demonstrations had organizational affiliation, they preferred in participation to be expressing themselves in the call for demonstrations, so that their organizational affiliation did not hinder their work and movement with other youth groups.⁶

The latest wide protest movement in Sudan or Algeria were not an exception from the Arab movements in general; it also witnessed wide attendance and participation of youth in protests. In Sudan, youth movements emerged outside the political party spectrum or the non-political spectrum too such as the armed movements, and in light of the declining role of the Sudanese parties and the armed movements in facing the ruling regime. This context led to the emergence of new bodies that absorbed the wasted youth energy for political and social expression. The emergence of youth groups was a realistic and logical matter, not to replace parties but rather to push the movement towards a faster pace away from the regulatory constraints of the parties and with flexibility and resilience that looks like youth. For instance, there was a youth group called 'We are sick of you' has emerged as the first stage of youth work with a qualified democratic cadres and different partisan backgrounds. The group launched its work by distributing paper clips and leaflets in the streets and addressing people in markets and public places in the capital and then later went from Khartoum to other cities. Though the movement engaged strongly in the protest of 2011 and 2013, however, it did



⁶ Georges Fahmi, The post-2011 rise of the Arab right-wing, in " Developments in the Arab region and the impact of international changes: Between populist trends and alternative voices", Arab Forum for Alternatives, 2020, <http://afalebanon.org/?p=8324>

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not manage to turn into a wide political movement as it collided with the traditional parties what hindered its capacities to move freely in the public space.⁷

Another youth movement appeared under the name of “Spark”, it was consisted of youth that were not part of any political parties. It was a spontaneous initiative, but it moved the street in the demonstrations of 2011, and then it turned from a virtual movement to a real movement on the ground; however, it was soon overlooked by the problems of funding and maintaining self-cohesion in the face of security services. The Sudanese experience may seem more aware of the necessities of coordination between youth movements and some political organizations such as parties and syndicates and unions. This was actually what happened in the recent movement of 2019 and produced "Tagmo' Al Mehaneen" in which it integrates anti-regime parties in addition to the movements of young professionals who are not part of parties and traditional unions and who are seeking to find their new professional unions and their various political organizations.⁸

In Algeria, the social protest movements since the 1980s that took many forms (economic, political, religious) share many characteristics that distinguish them, such as the main role of youth in them and their concentration in major cities and the popular neighborhoods in particular. It also share the same feature of its weak organization yet its radical visions and criticism for the dominant regimes.⁹ Despite the prominent role of these movements in the January 2011 movement, the traditional parties' apprehension of them in the context of fear of security breaches limited their ability to change, whether general demands or youth-related demands.¹⁰

The latest movement in Algeria in 2019 that toppled Bou Taflika also witnessed a remarkable participation from youth all over the country. There were many youth movements that emerged in these protests, and what is



⁷ Othman Shanger, Sudan's Youth Movements of Change - Hope whose features are not complete (Arabic), Al-Nilan website, 6/14/2016, <http://bit.ly/2K8bznr>

⁸ Sudan Tribune, a political reading on the Movement for Change in Sudan (Arabic), 9/26/2012, <http://bit.ly/2WkBWgH>

⁹ Abdel Nacer Gabi, Myth, Generation, and Social Movements in Algeria: Or "Failed" Father and "Leaping Son ", (Arabic), Algerian Journal of Anthropology and Social Sciences, "Humanities", No. 25-26, 2004, <https://journals.openedition.org/insaniyat/6583>

¹⁰ Abdel Nacer Gabi, Protest movements in Algeria, (Arabic) Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, January 2011, <http://bit.ly/2JKcc7s>

common between them is the loss of trust in the existing political parties and political institutions as well as adopting new tools and mechanisms that widened the gap between them and between political parties more.

This was the case as well in Lebanon from 2015 until now, Lebanese youth are protesting against the sectarian and classist regime in Lebanon that witnessed one of its largest protest movements in October 2019. The anti-sectarian protests were typically led by youth and young adults (born after or towards the end of the 1975-1990 civil war), and usually instigated by political groups (students' organizations, feminist collectives and leftist parties) or non-governmental organizations. Unlike the typically Beirut-centric movements in post-war Lebanon, the "October revolution" is inherently decentralized. The leaderless protests rapidly spread across the country and from North to South, major cities and smaller towns witnessed a unique explosion of anger and hope.¹¹

This quick overview showed that Arab youth movements -despite the different experiences and the different paths they took- had many commonalities whether in their forms of organizations that is somehow horizontal and issue-based or in terms of their forms of communication with the different political actors and involving in the public sphere.

Challenges ahead of Arab youth:

Though youth played a fundamental role in all of these protest movement, yet the main dilemma for youth in most of these experiences is their presence in the non-institutional movement, they are completely absent from the formal institutional and political and economic organizations.

For example, given the recent protests and civil unrest in numerous countries of the region (e.g. Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria), it is important not to overlook Arab youth aspiration for participation in the decision-making process. More than ever before, Arab youth are aware of the importance of participation and its relevance for them, their societies and their future. However, entrenched institutional arrangements, dated governing procedures, and inadequate evaluation and accountability mechanisms contributed largely to limited youth participation in decision-making and its different bodies.

¹¹ Alexandra Kassir, Lebanon's "October revolution": An end to the civil war?, Open Democracy, 13 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/3afJl3N>



For instance, we can argue that youth are almost entirely excluded from participation within the parliaments of more than half of the Arab countries, reaching a low of 7% in the parliaments of Bahrain and Lebanon. Furthermore, only 4 countries (Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Yemen) have established specialized youth-related legislative committees. The majority of countries of the region tends to address youth issues by proxy, through committees on sport, culture or family affairs. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the potentials and innovative ideas of the Arab youth that they showed in the protest movements are often under-employed by officials throughout the Arab region.¹²

Moreover, local community participation is perceived as one of the cornerstones of modern notions of citizenship because its institutions and decision- making procedures may allow for a more direct form of democracy in which the voices of ordinary individuals can be heard most easily, in addition to inclusion of minorities and less advantaged categories. On one hand, local democracy plays a role in facilitating the process of political education, that is, citizen participation allows individuals to gain knowledge about community affairs that otherwise resides with elected public officials and professional city administrators. More informed and educated citizens make democracy –

¹² Regional Overview Youth in the Arab Region-Western Asia, <https://bit.ly/2RIzo8q>

decision-making by the people – possible and more effective. Participation is about closing the gap between the political elite and citizens.¹³

Despite that, we can see that youth in the Arab region are not yet able to actively participate in formulating public policies, scrutinizing budgetary allocations, and monitoring accountability for the implementation and progress towards achievement of national priorities whether on national levels in parliaments as we mentioned earlier or on micro-levels such as municipalities.¹⁴ Despite the fact, that many constitutional and legal reforms were achieved recently in the Arab region regarding the participation of youth in municipalities.

For example in Morocco, there is a legal support for women and youth participation in municipal elections but there are many cultural, social and political disadvantages, which do not help them to express their will to be part of the political life.

In Tunisia and Egypt, for example, the legal framework provides an important quota that favors the participation of youth. However, there are many challenges that obstruct youth political participation in the municipal level, in spite of their high engagement in civil work, with the revolution. In Tunisia, despite the inclusion of youth on the electoral lists, participation among youth was not high, especially among those between 18 and 21 years old.¹⁵

Despite the importance of youth empowerment and participation in decision-making, there are other challenges ahead of youth in the Arab region; amongst the most significant is economic empowerment, which remains a vivid challenge for Arab youth especially with the high rates of unemployment in many countries of the region 29 % in 2013, versus 13 % worldwide.¹⁶

These challenges if remained unsolved shall hinder greatly the power of youth in boosting change in the region that will influence the whole process of democratic transition and shall cause a backlash as we have seen in many examples in countries of the region.

¹³ Timothy D. Sisk, Democracy at the local level, the international idea handbook on participation, representation, conflict management, and governance, International IDEA Handbook Series 4, <http://goo.gl/QXz3HL>

¹⁴ Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the prospects for human development in changing reality, UNDP, July 2017, <https://bit.ly/2xoQj9f>

¹⁵ Mohamed E Agati et al, Consolidation of citizenship through municipalities in the Arab region, Arab forum for Alternatives, 2017, <http://afalebanon.org/?p=8063>

¹⁶ Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the prospects for human development in changing reality, UNDP, July 2017, <https://bit.ly/2xoQj9f>

Conclusion:

The significance of studying the pivotal role of youth in the protest movements does not come only as a result for the ongoing waves since 2011. The significance comes from the urge to take this momentum in creating real and vivid changes in the lives of citizens in the Arab region and particularly youth. This means addressing important notions that are not exclusive to enhancing youth development, employment, education, and health care, etc. Yet focuses on enhancing mechanisms for the engagement of youth in formulating public policies, monitoring and evaluating public policy processes and even becoming part of the decision making bodies. In this regard, we can portray future scenarios for the role of Arab youth in the region in the upcoming period,

The first scenario is quite pessimistic. If all channels ahead of Arab youth remained closed to peacefully engage and participate in shaping and formulating policy with the growing restrictions on the public space in many countries of the region accompanied with economic hardships and high rates of unemployment, the threat of violent radicalization remains on the table. With its devastating repercussions on youth and the whole process of pursuing democracy, that will turn the asset of youth power and aspirations for change into a burden on the region that will hinder all efforts to fulfill democratic transformation.

The second scenario is the continuation of peaceful protest and mobilization in order to fulfill democratic transformation in the region. The second wave of the protests that came after eight years from the first one proved that the continuation of the same policies and regimes that exclude youth and disempower them economically and politically would lead to the eruption of protest movements all over again. We have seen also that youth movements learned from the other experiences and started to develop their techniques and methods in mobilization as in the Algerian case and negotiations with the regime as in the Sudanese case. However, this may appear a very long process, yet the accumulation of experiences, building capacities of youth in the region shall eventually lead to tangible change, that we can spot its features in the development of their discourse regarding issues of democracy, governance, citizenship and social justice.