# THE YOUTH CRISIS IN MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIETY

*BRIEF PAPER*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The culture of the Middle East is presently undergoing one of the greatest crises in its modern history. The old authoritarian order, so widespread through much of the region, is running out of steam and out of time. The gulf between ruler and ruled has never been greater, while frustration and anger among the general population at existing conditions—economic, social, political, and international—is at new heights.

In the meantime, with the 11 September 2001 al-Qa'ida attack upon the World Trade Center, Usama bin Ladin has made a bid to determine the nature of relationships between the Muslim world and the US.  Both Muslims and Westerners are now engaged in a discussion of the implications of what "Islam" means in political terms; both sides are struggling with how to avoid any sense of inevitability about a "clash of civilizations" and how to apportion "blame" for the state of serious tensions between the two sides that affect all levels of the population in the Muslim world. The US military overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the far reaching implications of this kind of change have as yet untold implications across the region.

Against the background of these dramatic events there lies a less dramatic, but possibly more important, phenomenon that may have greater impact over the longer run than even terrorism and war.  I refer to the emergence of a huge and growing population of young people in the region whose presence will likely shake present regimes from within more devastatingly than even the forces of international politics. This demographic factor, sometimes designated as a demographic "youth bulge," refers to the unusually large percentage of young people among the overall population.

**THE STATISTICS**

This growing youth population within Middle Eastern countries offers some disturbing figures:

- The most recent UN statistics show that the percentage of the population *under age fifteen* in the greater Middle East (excluding North Africa) is as high as 35.1%-- more than one person in three. By contrast, in Western Europe those under age fifteen make up only 16.9% of the population; in South America, 30.3%.  Only Sub-Saharan Africa surpasses the Middle East with 46.9% of the population under age fifteen.

- As UNICEF reports, "Truly astounding growth in the size of the youth population is expected in Yemen, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Oman."

- Currently, those states with high proportions of youth *under age 24* include Yemen at 65.3%, Saudi Arabia at 62.3%, Iraq at 61.7%, Pakistan at 61%, Iran at 59.3%, and Algeria at 56.5%, that is, nearly two out of three members of the population are under age 24 across the region. Political unrest already characterizes these critically important states.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The existence of a large youth population is not in itself automatically a negative element for any society. In well-functioning societies, a youthful population can add to the vigor and productivity of society: Western Europe, for example, with its aging population, could benefit immensely from a higher percentage of youth. Indeed, Western Europe is compelled to permit considerable immigration from abroad in order to meet its labor needs. But if societies lack the social infrastructure to integrate, employ and care for a growing population, the potential demographic benefits of a youthful population instead become a serious drain on the resources of the state and form a dangerously unstable element within society.

The reality is that in nearly all of the Middle East, the social infrastructure is poorly developed, ill-equipped to cope with the increase in a youthful population and lacks policies that are responsive to new social requirements. Thus, this population "bulge" has alarming implications across Middle Eastern societies and governments, adversely impacting upon government planning and placing new strains upon socio-economic conditions.

Even if some governments such as Iran and Egypt have begun to reduce their previous levels of high population growth, the problems of this demographic bulge are far from eliminated.

The process is like a large bulge passing through the body of a long snake: the bulge is present for a long period, but with time it passes through different parts along the length of the snake. In this case, the population "bulge," once youthful, begins to affect the state and socio-economic affairs in different ways as it ages, requiring different types of resources. Young children and their mothers require decent public health care facilities. Children reaching school age require education. Older youth require university education, and then jobs with adequate salaries, as well as the opportunity to marry and to find housing. Still decades later, this same bulge places new demands on health services as this group ages and requires social security.

**EASING OF THE YOUTH BULGE**

With each generation the youth bulge will be reduced in nearly all Middle East states (with Yemen virtually the sole exception.)  But this drop will come only slowly. The following table from UN world population statistics demonstrates how the percentage of the youth cohort *aged 24 years and below* drops over the next three decades in the following key states.

| State | 2000 | 2020 | 2030 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Egypt | 55.7 | 32.5 | 28.1 |
| Turkey | 50.4 | 39.2 | 35.7 |
| Iran | 59.3 | 42.4 | 38.9 |
| Pakistan | 61.0 | 56.2 | 51.4 |
| S. Arabia | 62.3 | 56.1 | 52.1 |
| Iraq | 61.7 | 53.9 | 47.2 |
| Yemen | 65.3 | 68.4 | 65.7 |
| Algeria | 56.5 | 40.9 | 37.4 |
| Indonesia | 50.7 | 39.5 | 36.4 |
| Morocco | 55.1 | 43.4 | 38.4 |

*Source: UN World Population Statistics*

Percentage

Egypt · Turkey · Iran · Pakistan · S. Arabia · Iraq · Yemen · Algeria · Indonesia · Morocco

■ 2000   ■ 2020   □ 2030
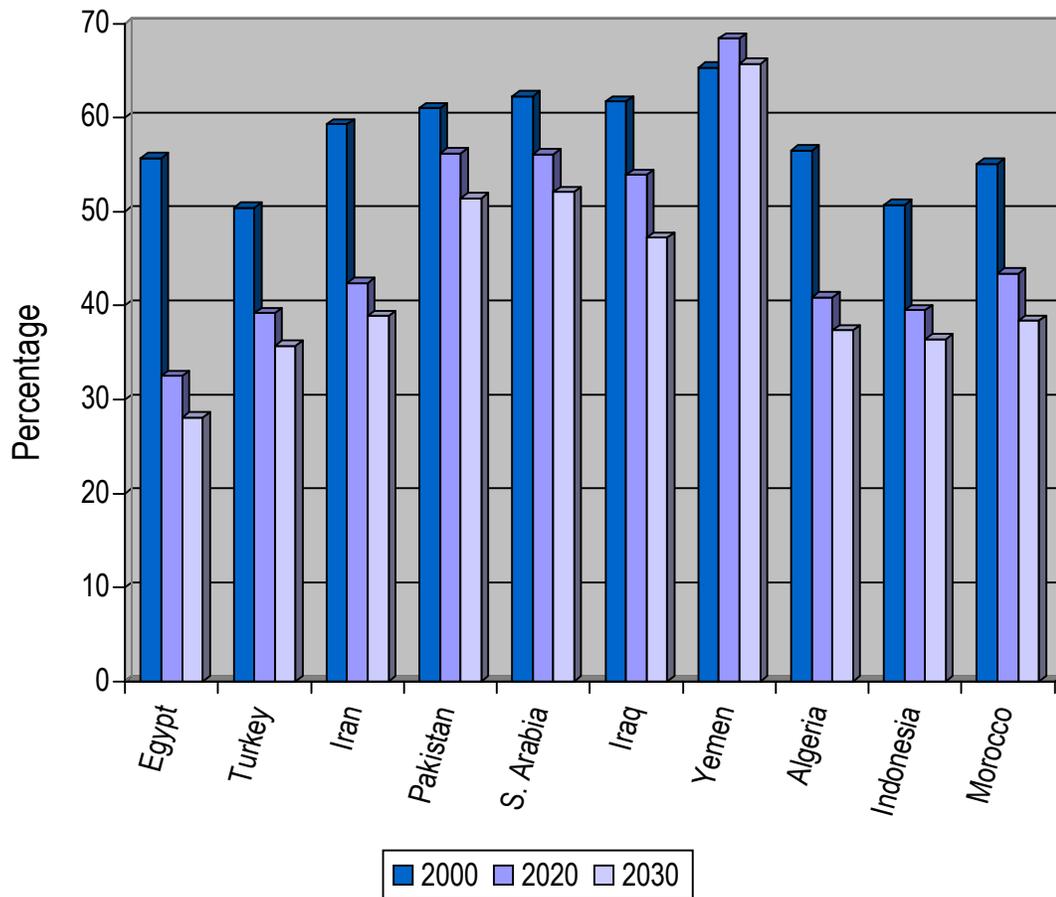
But note that even if the percentage of youth within the population gradually drops, these figures are nonetheless high. Furthermore, even if some demographic relief emerges within thirty years or so, thirty years is still a long duration over which population pressures engender immense impact on politics and society, potentially sparking serious crisis.  There are few indications that any of these societies are prepared to meet the political, social, economic, and infrastructural demands created by this youth bulge.

**STRAIN ON RESOURCES**

A. Education

In the field of education, most Middle East societies are sitting atop a volcano. Many of these states have in fact made some significant progress in building more schools and increasing the number of students in schools over the past

decade or so. UNDP figures show that the level of illiteracy among adults -- a key source of underdevelopment -- in the Arab world have indeed dropped from 60% to 43% between 1980 and the mid-1990s.  Yet, Arab illiteracy is still higher than the international average and even above that of the *average* developing country, especially among females.

Even while the state has allocated greater funds to education in general, the dramatic growth of the youth population places even higher demands on these resources. More importantly, in terms of *effectiveness* of education, the UNDP sees an overall regression in the quality of education available to Arab students, in part reflecting a dropping level of competence among teachers.

Thus, large numbers of students are not receiving education at a high enough level to prepare them for the demands of more complex societies. Space in universities is often limited, thereby denying higher education to an ever larger element of society.  Lowering levels of education in turn lowers the productivity of society in general and makes the region less competitive at the international level, in turn, requiring the import of expatriate specialists. This educational deficit impacts not only the overall economy of each state, but also the employability of students and the level of income to which they can aspire.

But even if these societies were to provide adequate higher level education, rising levels of education, per se, can have a subversive effect, particularly in authoritarian societies where public meetings are generally not permitted. Yet, educational institutions by their very nature require congregation of students who indeed are then more easily politicized, leading to greater dissent and expression of discontent. Education additionally permits articulation of grievances at a more sophisticated level as well as enhanced organizational skills to the dissidents. And finally, information technology now permits students to be better informed, not only about their own countries, but also about regional and international developments, which for the Muslim world have almost exclusively been a source of anger.  This frustration leads students to more readily challenge the state and demand change.

B. Unemployment

The presence of a youth bulge places huge new demands upon the economy for the provision of jobs. Most states in the region already face serious crises of unemployment.  For many decades, states had provided guarantee of near-automatic jobs at the white collar level to all university graduates, but over the past decade or more, the state has been unable to meet the rising demand, leaving large numbers of young graduates with nothing to do, waiting for work in weak economies where the private sector cannot remotely absorb these graduates. In many cases, their education has not even prepared them for the

job market, especially, as in Saudi Arabia most notably, where educational curricula has emphasized religious education—fine in itself, but harmful when it crowds out time for acquiring high level practical skills required by contemporary life such as mathematics, reading and writing skills, foreign languages, and technology. When students lack job prospects, indeed any hope for their futures, the implications for society are grave. Undeniably, the political violence in Algeria and strong support for Islamist parties there over the past decade has been due, in large measure, to the existence of large cohorts of the idle young – "Hittistes" – a French-Arabic coinage that means "wall-leaners," facing an empty future.

Limited prospects for employment translate into an inability to afford housing and complicate even the possibilities of marriage. Oftentimes, housing is insufficient and too expensive to meet demands. The sexual frustrations emerging from this situation, in already socially strict societies, creates also greater volatility among youth.

## RADICALISM

Radical socio-economic conditions create radical responses. The Middle East, furthermore, is now experiencing a simultaneous radicalization from both within and without. Negative conditions at home are now further intensified by external events across the region. Since the events of 9/11, the whole Arab world has come under intense pressure to reconcile with these events: how should al-Maida's challenge to the US be understood, and what should the appropriate response of Muslims be to the subsequent US Global War against Terror and the US military intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein?

There are two broad types of response — polarities — that youth can take toward these searing series of events that challenge the very meaning of what Islam is all about in the early 21$^{st}$ century. First might be to acknowledge that change is desperately needed in the Muslim world, beginning first and foremost in the youths' own countries. Here, young people do desire change and liberation from a status quo that is perceived as intolerable, yet somehow frozen and immovable. In this sense, the War against Terrorism, the war in Afghanistan, the overthrow of Saddam's brutal tyranny and President Bush's call for regional democratization have stimulated new pressures and challenges to existing regimes.

Is it possible that Muslim youth will now respond positively to American calls for an agenda of change and democratization, as the full extent of the failings of their own regimes is becoming ever clearer? There is in fact broad admiration on the part of large numbers in the Middle East for many elements of American *domestic* life: the democracy, the tolerance, the openness, the personal hospitality, the educational system, the technology and the

opportunities to develop oneself and one's life. Many aspects of American popular culture carry a certain appeal for young people around the world and they are widely imitated in terms of music, clothing, foods and certain kinds of life-style.

Indeed, this phenomenon has generated false hopes within the US administration that the cultural appeal of American life could serve to overcome the demonstrable hostility toward the US – a hostility that eclipses all earlier periods of Muslim dissatisfaction with the US. In Washington, a growing awareness of this anti-American hostility initially created the conviction that these "misunderstandings" in the Muslim world about America's true nature could be cleared up through adroit public relations campaigns – a campaign that pointedly excluded any review of those specific US policies that Muslims have found so objectionable over the years. This campaign has patently failed.

The Western model of society, with all its benefits and allure, indeed can- and does- attract many Muslim youth in various aspects, but the reality is that such an American life-style is unattainable to all but the wealthy and cosmopolitan elite, with the money and the opportunity to pursue a more Western lifestyle. When the majority of youth cannot even hope to emulate an American lifestyle due to financial, class or opportunity limitations, it often turns harshly against it, perceiving it as symbolic of a culture that is both foreign and even threatening and hostile to indigenous cultures.

The alternative response to the challenges of 9/11 is to embrace one's own culture, to hunker down and identify ever more deeply with the hard core roots of Islamic identity, including more basic and fundamentalist forms of Islam. In one sense, if the allure of a permissive social and consumerist environment are impossible for most Muslim young men to attain, these individuals will turn harshly against it and identify with the moral austerity of an Islamist message. Identity thus becomes wrapped up in Islam and its political formulation becomes both radical and anti-establishment, except in those few places – Iran, the Talibans' Afghanistan, and Sudan – where revolutionary Islam is in power.

If youth craves change and the American model is not available to it, the Islamic model of challenging the status quo becomes the natural alternative. In this sense, while Islamist ideology in all its various forms may be culturally conservative, in political terms, it is revolutionary and hence provides an exciting and radical channel that simultaneously celebrates one's own Islamic roots, a critique of existing conditions, identifies the foreign challenger and enemy, and offers a program of reform and change, sometimes revolutionary in nature. Several decades ago, the answer might have been Marxism-Leninism, but that ideology was a rather more intellectual one, imported from the West, not at all rooted in Muslim culture and largely the domain of the educated. Today, Islamism is rooted in indigenous culture – a factor that gives it an immense advantage over other "imported" ideologies, including Western liberalism.

Unfortunately, in times of hardship or a sense of personal and moral emptiness, inadequacy and lack of prospects for the future, the individual is more likely to turn to radical or basic forms of ideology, including religious ideology. Moderate or balanced forms of religious belief simply don't have the drawing power or the explanatory power that radical Islamist views possess.

Thus, as youth comes under ever greater cultural and political pressure from the US, and living conditions deteriorate as a result of the inability of the state to respond to the infrastructural demands of the demographic youth bulge, it is most likely that the majority of youth will turn to Islamism, in either its moderate or radical variants. There are few other ideologies on the horizon today to rival and challenge Islamism.

## THE AGING NATURE OF MIDDLE EAST LEADERSHIP

Even as the proportion of youth within Middle Eastern societies grows, the leadership of most of the region remains in the hands of an aging generation that is often out of touch with the realities of the modern world. This situation stems from two reasons. First, the political order in most of the region is autocratic, where kings, emirs, or presidents-for-life remain in power, with few mechanisms for replacement. Most leaders only leave office in a coffin. Second, the socially conservative nature of Middle Eastern societies, in general, places a premium upon age as bearer of wisdom and a source of stability. Unfortunately, in no society does age ever guarantee wisdom and the Middle East is deficient in wise and flexible leadership, and it is almost never popularly elected.

Yet, it would seem that one of the few avenues for alleviation of a youth-induced crisis political and social crisis would be to co-opt youth into the system and give the population a sense that it has some control over its own destiny. Perhaps the most negative feature of Middle Eastern life today is a sense of impotence, that the average citizen can do nothing to change existing conditions. They cannot remove their unpopular leaders; they cannot affect change in their policies, and are often victims of those same policies – especially when the policies are reinforced through the harsh methods of the security services.

Thus, an opening up of the system that would permit youthful voices and grievances to be heard, to be represented, and to receive response is one of the few ways to defuse a growing time-bomb. All political observers acknowledge that political liberation and change in the region will initially give vent to massive accumulated frustration as it finds avenue for expression for the first time in long years. A certain form of radicalism, in content and in style, of any new popular leadership is predictable – at least for a while. But there is no avoiding this process. The process can be negotiated cautiously and carefully, but in the end,

the process inevitably augurs the end of most of the current leadership in the region. Reform processes that do not permit this ultimate progression will fail. Wise leadership will perceive this handwriting on the wall and will work with it rather than against it.

Regrettably, the imperatives of US policy in the region today – the need to fight terrorism and to gain cooperation of regional rulers to participate in the struggle against terrorism – is working directly against the imperatives of reform and democratization, even as called for by President Bush. Clever leaders exploit the American call for the war against terror to brand as "terrorists" much of their own internal opposition. Thus, the likelihood of continuous change and reform seems highly limited, leaving the region open to prospects for violent and sudden change, in which the youth is likely to be the driving force.

## ISLAMIC IDENTITY AMONG YOUTH

As the forces of political Islam grow, they become the strongest vehicle in the demand for change. Such movements also strengthen *Islamic* identity rather than a purely national identity across the region. Today, electronic media ensure that Muslims from Indonesia to Morocco, Tatarstan to South Africa, and across Europe and America, are well aware of the common predicaments shared by so many Muslims. Muslim youth in the West quickly shed the national identities of their immigrant parents – as Pakistanis, Egyptians, Iranians and Turks – to adopt a shared identity as Muslims, but Muslim-American, Muslim-German, Muslim-British, etc. Islam in the West now is becoming a quasi-"nationality" in its own right. Such an evolution actually offers hope that new and moderate forms of Islam, developed in the West, will in turn impact upon youth in the Muslim world itself. Unfortunately, political Islam is not presently moving in moderate directions in many parts of the Muslim world due to the intensity of pressures upon these regions, both domestically and from abroad.

## CONCLUSION

The growing size of a young generation among the general population in the Muslim world will magnify already existing regime failures to find solutions to socio-economic and political problems. In the coming decades, these failures are certain to hasten the moment of regime crisis, causing eventual collapse in many cases with unknown consequences.

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