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Ten Years Since the “Arab Spring”: Despair Has Not Become More Comfortable

by [Michael Milstein](#)

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Brief Analysis

Recent polling of Arab youth demonstrates the frustration that young Arabs continue to feel with their governments and at the lack of opportunities available to them, a decade after the Arab spring.

Two new, wide-ranging Arab public opinion polls were released recently, designed to measure underlying regional trends and, in part, to mark the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring. The first is the [2019-20 Arab Opinion Index](#), the seventh in a series of annual public opinion surveys conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, Qatar. The second is the [12th Annual Arab Youth Survey](#), administered by the Dubai-based ASDA'A BCW communications agency. Both research reports are based on the analysis of survey responses collected in the past year from tens of thousands of people across 15 Arab countries.

As with most Arab surveys, one must examine any questions touching on the political arena with caution, verging on suspicion. Such polls often reflect the interests of the survey organizer, and the respondents themselves are likely to display much caution in giving their answers. As such, it is not surprising to see, in a survey conducted under Qatari auspices, that [the results indicate](#) that most Arabs express hostility toward Saudi Arabia, shun recognition of Israel (by a margin of 88% in this account), and yearn for pan-Arab solidarity; after all, Azmi Bishara, the renegade Israeli Arab politician and hardline Arab nationalist, heads this research institute. In contrast, in the Arab Youth Survey, Saudi Arabia is [described as](#) a rising power in the region; and the UAE, for the ninth year in a row, earns the title of favorite place to live among all Arabs, surpassing the United States, Canada, or Britain.

As such, the more interesting parts of these polls, as in most Arab surveys (including among the Palestinians) are the sections about social, cultural, and economic issues. These questions remain relatively free of political calculations

and are therefore likely to reflect more authentic underlying trends. Indeed, these two Arab surveys, sharply different in other ways, exhibit a rare uniformity of views in precisely those more apolitical areas.

Their sad consensus is this: a decade after the optimistic eruption of the Arab Spring, most inhabitants of these Arab states—especially among the younger generation—sense a combination of material privation, apprehension, or even despair about their future. They also express a total lack of confidence in the ability or will of their regimes to solve the basic problems they face in either the social or the economic sphere.

To be sure, as David Pollock [first pointed out](#) several years ago, there is not just one but many different “Arab streets” in different countries—or even, at times, within one Arab state. One can also find some bright exceptions to this general Arab winter of discontent. The overall picture, however, presents the following stark conclusions.

First, economic realities now stand at the center of Arab publics’ agendas and at the core of their personal and collective desires. When respondents of the Arab Opinion Index were asked about the main reasons behind the eruption of the first and second waves of the Arab Spring—the first one a decade ago, and the second one in other countries during the past year—the following responses led the list: unemployment, personal debt, and government corruption. In 2015, 15% of Arab Youth Survey respondents [reported](#) that they were mired in debt; today, the corresponding average figure has leapt to 35%, with especially high proportions among Syrians, Jordanians, and Palestinians. Moreover, 80% of all Arab Youth Survey respondents say they think Arab regimes are corrupt.

Second, in sharp contrast, issues of democracy or political freedoms appear only on the margins of responses from either survey. The relegation of such issues to the sidelines is particularly pronounced right now, as the responses are given in the midst of a second regional wave of popular protests during 2019-2020. This evinces a realization that the past decade of revolutions has borne rather bitter fruit: civil war, humanitarian distress, the rise of powerful extremist elements, and the collapse of governing restraints.

Today, rather than seeking to change the world, most Arabs (especially the younger generation) demonstrate that mere improvements in their material condition would suffice. Often enough they prioritize self realization over collective interests, as if inspired by the extreme individualist sensibility now prevalent around the world.

These two survey responses, then, can help provide a rough profile of the shared concerns and priorities of the young, twenty-first century Arab generation. It is tired of slogans about struggle or revolution that characterized the Arab world in the twentieth century but yielded few meaningful achievements. On the contrary; most Arabs feel that era produced only a decline in their condition. This generation is also wired and networked, and therefore well aware of the wider world, including the gap between what transpires out there and its own internal situation. It yearns for self-realization yet is frustrated by the inability to realize its desires.

From this vantage point, the younger Arab generation has a hard time locating its representatives in any national leadership; it feels alienated from establishment values and objectives. To a great extent, there is the sense that this new generation speaks an entirely different language, and grasps a wholly separate conceptual world, from those of previous generations.

This is suggested by the fact that the majority in both surveys report that they do not identify with any political party or movement, and that their confidence in any of them is minimal. This, then, is a generation that is largely apolitical, indeed almost anti-ideological. Its main refuge, in a growing trend over the past decade, would be simply to escape from the region altogether. It’s no surprise, then, that a majority of respondents in the Arab Youth Survey, most notably those in Lebanon, Libya, and Iraq, [express](#) a strong desire to emigrate from the Arab world, including 40% who have considered leaving their country of origin permanently.

Third, in the cultural realm, the two surveys sketch the outlines of a worldview replete with internal contradictions, or at least ambivalence. As the Arab Opinion Index demonstrates, a large and increasing proportion of Arabs [claim](#)

that they are either traditional (63%) or very religious (23%), and that religion is the central ingredient in their identity: 40% chose religion as the most important aspect of identity ahead of either family or national affiliation.

On the other hand, there exists sweeping opposition (70%) to clerical involvement in managing government affairs, apparently in view of widespread disillusionment with all those cases in which Islamist elements took over power in Arab countries: from Hamas in Gaza in 2007, to Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt in 2012-13, to the terrifying, ruinous regime of ISIS in parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014-18.

In this connection, another curious combination of attitudes emerging from the Arab Opinion Index is worthy of note: overwhelming repulsion (88%) regarding the ISIS phenomenon, alongside the claim (by 55%) that it developed under the auspices of outside powers rather than from maladies internal to the Arab world (27%).

Fourth, the online domain unsurprisingly lies at the epicenter of contemporary Arab life, particularly among the younger generation. As the Arab Opinion Index [shows](#), 73% of Arabs are now Internet users, compared to just 55% in 2011. Of those, 86% of those who use internet have a Facebook account; 55% are on Instagram; and 43% are on Twitter.

This domain exposes younger Arabs to the world in a way that was simply not possible for their elders. That, in turn, makes it difficult for Arab regimes to keep things secret, or to detach their publics from the outside world—and even harder to sell them false facades. News bulletins and new ideas spread across the entire Middle East at speed of a few clicks or a WhatsApp message, even if most of that traffic consists only of slogans or superficial content.

Taken together, the central conclusion that emerges from this pair of polls that regional volatility is still with us. Most of the basic problems in whose ‘garden’ the Arab Spring first blossomed have not been resolved. In fact, the socioeconomic status of Arab youth has actually regressed in many respects. The exceptions are the Gulf Arab states, where relative economic stability has allowed this volatility to pass quietly over them.

The shaky foundations of the real “New Middle East,” could be easily destabilized by the many millions of young people, in whose everyday experience their aspirations for change clash incessantly with the frustrations of the unchanging reality they must endure.

Despite the general preoccupation with the coronavirus around the Arab world in the past year, this deeper socioeconomic unrest continues to swirl around the younger generation across the region. It could find expression in a third wave of the Arab Spring, which could develop in any of the countries suffering from the maladies outlined by young respondents, including those that already witnessed revolution a decade before. First and foremost in this category is Egypt, whose sensitive economic situation lies perennially on the precipice. Lebanon is another such candidate, currently likened to a volcano that could erupt at any moment.

Alternatively, unrest might flare up in some new places that avoided the first round. The prime possibility here is Jordan, where the combination of its socioeconomic situation and widening public criticism of the monarchy are liable to become a template for severe internal protests. Then there is the Palestinian arena, where the regimes in both Gaza and Ramallah are hard pressed to provide real answers to the core problems of their young population—and it is unclear how much longer they will succeed in deflecting internal protest against them by turning the focus of popular frustration and rage against “the Israeli enemy.”

Though lacking much practical influence, volatility in much of the Arab region—especially in neighboring countries—is also worrisome news for Israel. Viewed as particularly threatening is the prospect of unrest in the Palestinian arena, which potentially has direct implications for Israel’s strategic posture. And that is precisely where, in contrast to conditions in surrounding Arab states, Israel does have more tools available, especially in economic and civil affairs, in order to exert an influence upon events.

Particularly in the West Bank, there is already an understanding that notwithstanding their already difficult circumstances, their current situation remains better compared to other parts of the region that have had to live through an Arab Spring. According Khalil Shikaki`s Poll from December 2019, 65% of the Palestinians don`t want the Arab spring to spread into the Palestinian arena.

Israel can further support stability by promoting broad economic projects in the West Bank while continuing the transfer of revenues, money and a large amount of permits for workers, even if the political crisis continues. Israel should also focus on keeping a relatively high standard of life in the West Bank while working to convince the international community to make further investments in or donations to the Palestinian Authority.

Israel has already made effective use of some of these tools over the course of the past decade to help stabilize the situation, primarily in the West Bank though in Gaza as well. Continued application of these tools promises to help ensure that the Arab Spring keeps skipping over the Palestinian Territories and preventing some of the more dire outcomes evidenced elsewhere in the Arab world. ❖



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