

# The Challenges Behind Youth Leadership in the Arab World

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## Arab institutions and Arab youth themselves are both responsible for a lack of community engagement among young people in Arab countries.

Future leaders. Builders of tomorrow. Change-makers. These are all terms used to describe Arab youth in public statements, media programs, newspapers, and social media in many Arab countries. And there is good reason to put stock in the Arab countries' youth—with an estimated 146 million people, or 34 percent of the region's total population between the ages of 15 and 34, the Arab states are collectively very young. What's more, the Arab countries are among the regions of the world that spend the most on higher education.

But even with such a large population of young people, it's not clear whether Arab youth are realizing their full potential. According to estimates by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the youth unemployment rate in Arab countries is over 30 percent, ranking first in the world. Likewise, a strong interest in emigrating has caused the region to experience a brain drain. While many young Arabs lack opportunities for employment or even basic security, a resulting culture of self-image and defeatism is also threatening the ability of many to engage in meaningful public participation.

### Loss of Self

A few months ago, a satirical meme spread around Arabic social media showing individual photos of three famous Hollywood actors and a photo of an elderly Arab man. The names and ages of each person are written beneath their images. With youthful, vivacious smiles, the Hollywood actors are all indicated to be in their mid-to-late fifties, while the elderly man, who shows a mournful, aged face, is referred to as "Alaa from Syria," age 31.

Beneath the dark humor is a warning that represents a loss of enthusiasm and hope among Arab youth. One can only imagine that what drives young people to resonate with the image is parallel to motivation for young people who board death boats as they attempt to cross illegally from Syria or North Africa into Europe, often only to be caught and returned to their home countries if they haven't drowned.

Even apart from the tremendous violence in some Arab countries, the marginalization that Arab youth experience creates a sense of alienation from their respective homelands. As a result, many either chose to embark on what can become permanent migration or are driven to despair, sometimes even turning to suicide. It is this marginalization, this sense of a loss of self and the inability to know what they want from life that shapes the experiences of many Arab youth.

In this sense, many young Arabs are wandering, searching for an unknown something to help shape their approach to the world. It is therefore unsurprising to see that a recent survey of Arab youth—[released by ASDA'A BCW in collaboration with the international research firm PSB \(https://arabic.cnn.com/business/article/2020/10/08/arab-youth-survey-migration\)](#)—revealed that approximately 42% of Arab youth are seriously considering emigrating from their country, with 40% reporting they do not desire to return to their countries. It is vital that we recognize the huge percentage of young people in the region who wish to emigrate, and that we understand what this trend indicates about the mental health and emotional wellbeing of the region's young people.

There are those who believe that a heavy fault for this situation lies squarely with the Arab governments where this phenomenon is taking place. These governments, critics claim, have not given the youth appropriate opportunities to seriously participate in governance or civil society, and the institutions entrusted with the care and development of the youth in the region's countries play a role in the lack of emotional health among young people in the region. Meanwhile, others hold the youth themselves responsible, accusing them of lacking sufficient awareness or desire for real community participation.

However, the complicated reality suggests that it is some combination of the two, as emblemized by a few real-world examples. In one Arab country, a young man was tasked with the responsibility of managing a government office concerned with youth engagement in society. Instead of performing his professional duties and engaging in serious and impactful work, he devoted himself to attending seminars and conferences, appearing in front of cameras and claiming that those appearances were important achievements in and of themselves.

Then, rather than discussing the serious challenges involved with his job, he used press statements to journalists to boost the visibility of his appearances while ignoring the potential for real achievements involved with his work. Here, the young man took on a great opportunity and turned it into a game. He did not improve the management of the office or use it to serve society and public affairs. He apparently lacked the framework to shoulder the responsibility, and while the young man was not marginalized, he marginalized those around him to achieve the self-importance that perhaps he was missing.

In another real situation, summarized in a few scenes in [an Egyptian TV drama \*Taqa Nour\* \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?](#)

[bRlwPs71U3g6mit5r4iwDwzBdDDgxDrenS0hWXMbxZ99qXQJV58RtY0jVvkNJG2zdgglXBn2lqITyrT80yDP'TaN9-giNjMvHtU-3nCUoDKMBxySWktNjN00JZvelFJqBe\)](#), a young man from a simple family attempts to get a job at a prestigious institution in the hope of realizing his lifetime dream. He believes that educational degrees and a mastery of foreign languages will open the doors of success for him. But when he goes to the job interview, he meets another young man there, of the same age but from a prominent family, who smiles and says he has already been accepted even before the interview because of his family's fine reputation and high class. He advises the first young man to go home, as his place was not among the upper class. The young man then goes home and decides to commit suicide.

These are two different scenes. In the first, the young man marginalized those around him after taking on responsibility by focusing on self-image over the potential good he could do in his role. In the other, the young man was not able to take on responsibility because he was marginalized by societal factors of nepotism and corruption. Nonetheless, the common factor in each is that society, for many years, had not instilled in them a sense of self-confidence or an understanding of the meaning of public work, self-control, and effective leadership—even as opportunities are presented in abundance to some and denied to many others.

Some believe that difficult economic conditions are fully responsible for the marginalization of Arab youth. Yet even in wealthy Arab countries, Arab youths indicate a low interest in

participation in the public sphere. In an [opinion poll conducted by the Arab Youth Center \(https://arabyouthcenter.org/en/article/our-research/arab-youth-priority-survey\)](https://arabyouthcenter.org/en/article/our-research/arab-youth-priority-survey) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), 73% of those surveyed—from across the Arab world—sought safety and security as their top priority. Some 70% placed education within their top concerns, while 62% put healthcare at third place in their essential needs, and 31% said they are looking for sources of income. In contrast, just 17% of participants ranked personal development as a top concern. Furthermore, public participation only garnered 10% of the attention of Arab youth, one of the lowest percentages in the survey. More notable was that the stability of a country did not seem to play a definitive role in shaping these views—Syrian, Jordanian, and Saudi youth were the most likely (though still only 13%) to emphasize community participation, whereas 0% of Kuwaiti youth saw it as a top priority.

The above shows that Arab youth's priorities in different countries—whether high-, medium-, or low-income—share a high interest in security and safety, education, and healthcare. In contrast, most young people's relative interest in public matters, community participation, and playing a more effective role in their domestic or international surroundings does not come high on their list of priorities; rather, they are concerned with obtaining their basic needs. A lack of available or perceived opportunities causes Arab youth to close in on themselves out of their own will and through their limited vision of individual priorities and interests. The poll confirmed this notion, also indicating that youth in Arab countries with high purchasing power have less interest in community engagement (33%) compared to youth in Arab countries with a mid-range purchasing power (44%) and low purchasing power (35%). This result refutes all the claims relating this crisis to economics alone.

One alternative cause for the lack of public engagement among Arab youth could be a deficiency in Arab education systems. Strangely, while education ranked second in Arab youth priorities, when young people were asked in a [2017 survey conducted by the World Bank Middle East and North Africa \(MENA\) region \(http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/832861579102674911/pdf/Overview.pdf%3Chttps://url.emailprotection.link/?bBZXKxnmfYZk-B3Zz8HA-GB9s0pAE\\_pSQGZ89gE4RIKWGNgZSKl5KmYoqaNvmLLnsB3IQRE4hv6m8GWUL4HYxrzw1u7qwnuR6v40ACUVHctE1cSKXz9DLF\\_4MxfOreKQoDN-Oe4C4WzIbWDTE92xtH4PWsDIOGusmuFelCaQf\\_4k-%3E\)](http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/832861579102674911/pdf/Overview.pdf%3Chttps://url.emailprotection.link/?bBZXKxnmfYZk-B3Zz8HA-GB9s0pAE_pSQGZ89gE4RIKWGNgZSKl5KmYoqaNvmLLnsB3IQRE4hv6m8GWUL4HYxrzw1u7qwnuR6v40ACUVHctE1cSKXz9DLF_4MxfOreKQoDN-Oe4C4WzIbWDTE92xtH4PWsDIOGusmuFelCaQf_4k-%3E) on Facebook, in which they were asked whether education, in their opinion, improved their chances in the job market in their countries, 92% of the respondents answered "no." One survey participant even answered "a thousand times no." Furthermore, aside from the ineffectiveness of education in providing career opportunities for young people, the World Bank also pointed out [that 25% of Islamic State fighters \(http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/582871475669923685/pdf/108525-REVISED-ARABIC-PUBLIC.pdf%3Chttps://url.emailprotection.link/?bc3fXORqJ017cT0MwHBjQlF1pzHwEs2NgrOQngpTsPSTeCHSSJtDdOdPQ9Pnv6NcKZwOeg1ajy7gIHh\\_YW\\_fcpwy1SR60fsVzMOIExzOpOmM8QXEQZJa40\\_wWuoGdsOITXAzE9f2hPi0qGV9BkLfhQh9Zhp9ee2F8gWpVbDaeMwP1w~-%3E\)](http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/582871475669923685/pdf/108525-REVISED-ARABIC-PUBLIC.pdf%3Chttps://url.emailprotection.link/?bc3fXORqJ017cT0MwHBjQlF1pzHwEs2NgrOQngpTsPSTeCHSSJtDdOdPQ9Pnv6NcKZwOeg1ajy7gIHh_YW_fcpwy1SR60fsVzMOIExzOpOmM8QXEQZJa40_wWuoGdsOITXAzE9f2hPi0qGV9BkLfhQh9Zhp9ee2F8gWpVbDaeMwP1w~-%3E) coming from the Middle East and North Africa have a university education. Considering the foundational impact of education on young people's values and dreams, this statistic reveals that there may be a serious lack of emphasis on community engagement and positive communal values in Arab education systems.

Furthermore, with the spread of social media among Arab youth, some expected at first that the youth would desire to use them in a practical and serious way. But while social media played a major and public role a decade prior during the Arab Spring, today's social media trends—including those among the Arab world—often prioritize entertainment, selfie-culture, and the glorification of material gains and celebrity status. There is even the phenomenon of some social media users feigning illness or an accident to attract attention and collect comments and likes on their profiles.

### Shared Responsibilities

Responsibility for this crisis of self among young people is shared between the governments and authorities entrusted with developing the youth in a real and serious way, far from public statements and high-flung speeches, met with warm applause. Nonetheless, it also lies with those young people who focus on self-image as the path to success. It is also important to stay focused on the realities of the problems at hand: some young people fall to conspiracy theories to determine the solution to their crises. Others must ward off the familiar feeling of defeat, giving up after initial failed attempt to make a difference in their world.

Moreover, there are those who have decided to leave the countries as a whole to escape their realities, further contributing to brain drain and the shaping of a society without young leaders. Likewise, we should not forget the role of society and its education system in raising young people who understand how to make decisions, rely on the strength of thought, and discern where they are going and what they want out of life.

Regardless of whether one sees the current limitations on youth participation as a product of Arab societies, as reflective of the youth themselves, or a combination of both, the challenge remains. And what is certain is that all of us, together, must spend significant time thinking about the future of the region, which will rely completely upon its youth. So the important question remains: Are the youth able to seriously bear the responsibility of leading the future of the Arab world towards safety? ❖

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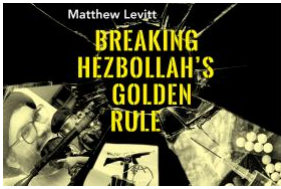
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