

YOUTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

November 2008



Barbara Ibrahim, PhD in sociology, is founder and director of the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement at the American University in Cairo. Dr. Ibrahim advises groups across the Arab region on strategic philanthropy, social innovation, and corporate responsibility. She was Regional Director for West Asia and North Africa at the Population Council from 1991 to 2006.

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) was inaugurated in 2006 to harness the policy-related research of AUB's internationally respected faculty and other scholars, in order to contribute positively to Arab policy-making and international relations. IFI is a neutral, dynamic, civil, and open space that brings together people representing all viewpoints in society. It aims to: raise the quality of public policy-related debate and decision-making in the Arab World and abroad; enhance the Arab World's input into international affairs; and, enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in the Middle East and abroad.

Research and Policy Memo #1

Young Egyptians reinvent civic engagement, leading to new forms of public service

As the largest ever cohort of young people in the Arab World struggles to find its place in society, youth are forging arenas for public participation that draw upon new media and traditional social service. Initiated by young people, this movement responds to the exclusion they feel from family and state structures that block their public participation. It is a new brand of youth movements that Dr. Barbara Ibrahim and other researchers have identified in Egypt, representing a trend that bears important policy implications for positively engaging youth amidst rising unemployment and religious militancy.

"Youth and discourses about youth are treated, in our part of the world in particular, in a very didactic, simplistic way," said Ibrahim, a leading sociologist and researcher on Arab youth, at a lecture at the American University of Beirut. Commonly conceived as either apathetic and self-absorbed or delinquent and dangerous, young people across the region lack civic spaces to meaningfully participate in society.

Ibrahim and her colleagues have studied three youth organizations in Egypt that show how youth are crafting new means and spaces to meet their personal, social, and career aspirations, simultaneously with traditional expectations. Resala, one of the three surveyed organizations in Egypt, has 70,000 registered members and is the largest youth-led organization in the Arab World.

"What motivates young people to take this kind of initiative? Why is it happening now?" said Ibrahim, posing the core questions of her lecture, the first in a series on Arab youth sponsored by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI).

The Research and Policy Forum on Youth in the Arab World also includes research by AUB faculty, a comprehensive database of research on youth-related issues from around the world, and conferences. One of three IFI programs launched this year, the youth program "aims to engage researchers and policymakers alike with the myriad issues that face the young people of this region," said IFI Director Rami Khouri. The program's lecture series will continue in the fall.

Policy Recommendations

- Arab youth are eager to participate in improving their societies but feel excluded by states, community leaders, and their families
- When avenues of political reform are blocked, youth turn to social service to express civic engagement
- NGO's can harness this youthful enthusiasm by creating more opportunities for youth-led activities
- Arab governments should support not suppress expansion of youth service programs
- Youth leaders should be helped to form effective networks for societal change

New means, timeless needs

Organizations such as Resala represent an unprecedented kind of Arab youth activism, said Ibrahim. Entirely founded and run by young people, the organizations use new means—the internet, TV advertising, and online social networks—to reach more traditional goals: providing social services

Youth in the Arab World

produces research as well as acts as a catalyst and clearing-house among regional and international research and policy on Arab youth. It aims to publish and exchange policy-relevant findings, with a focus on shared experiences and lessons learned; and identify gaps in the global knowledge base on Arab youth-related issues, including education, governance, public health, and civic engagement.

Rami G. Khouri *IFI Director*
Zina Sawaf *Program Coordinator*



Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs

American University of Beirut

408 Diana Tamari Sabbagh
(DTS) Building
PO Box 11-0236, Riad el Solh
Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon
Tel: 961-1-350000, x 4150
Fax: 961-1-737627
e-mail: ifi@aub.edu.lb



Issam Fares Institute Website

staff.aub.edu.lb/~webifi/

Center for Behavioral Research Website

http://staff.aub.edu.lb/~websbs/Sociology/Center_of_behavioral_research/Mission.htm

AUB Youtube Channel

www.youtube.com/AUBatLebanon

AUB website:

www.aub.edu.lb

such as running orphanages, teaching disabled children, and starting literacy programs.

Members express a strong religious motivation to improve their communities, but the organizations are not religious in rhetoric or activities, according to Ibrahim's research. Youth who involve their parents in their activities allay the older generation's fears that youth activism can only be motivated by, or lead to, religious fundamentalism.

"That is turning on its head what we know about social service organizations in the Middle East," said Ibrahim. Far-reaching youth initiatives are more vigorous today than the historic noblesse oblige of Egypt's high society, she said, noting that Egypt's youth are in some cases providing the impetus for an older generation to become more active citizens.

While volunteerism is the socially and politically acceptable face of youth activism, there are more basic, practical motivations for participation, said Ibrahim. Volunteering is a legitimate reason for young unmarried females to get out of the home. For both men and women, these institutions provide an opportunity for social interaction in a conservative society. For some, an economic motive is at play, allowing young people to effectively utilize their time and to network while they seek employment.

“Youth activism will move off the streets and into non-ideological spaces of technology and knowledge.”

Pragmatism and piety

One factor fueling this type of youth volunteering is what Ibrahim calls "a neo-liberal acceptance of the state's failure in providing services" to assure a smooth entry of youth into adult life. "They have a sense that they have to make it up for themselves," she said, so they create their own modes of engagement instead of holding any expectations of their government or community.

While they choose practical engagement over socialist or Islamist rhetoric, the youth in Ibrahim's study are strongly motivated by religion. Young people frame their participation in public life in terms of piety and the accumulation of spiritual capital "for this life and the next," said Ibrahim, echoing the reasoning of the young volunteers she interviewed. "This is so pervasive that we really have to conclude that a revival of religion is also creating a revival in thinking about ways to participate in public and be in the community," she said.

Yet Ibrahim and colleagues "were struck by the lack of religious rhetoric once you get inside the organization and see it in action." Despite deep personal religious motivation, volunteers mainly express a commitment to improve themselves and build a strong, caring community. "It's a way of flying under the political radar," said Ibrahim, "but building a cadre of active, proactive, and networked young people." And while most of these organizations have successfully avoided state scrutiny, Resala has been banned from university campuses.

These new avenues of participation, created by youth for youth, are "ways of mobilizing participation that aren't particularly well-understood currently by academics or by the state," said Ibrahim. Youth activism across the region will continue to grow, she suggested, and will move off the streets and into non-ideological spaces of technology, service and community organizing, creating "new pathways of reform, even civil disobedience, which are in the hands of young people." ■



Audio and video of the full lecture are available on the IFI website.