

10th anniversary

AR₁₀

Arab Reform Initiative

Celebrating 10 years as the leading independent Arab think tank

Programme

**Sunday 1st November 2015
Ramada Plaza Hotel**

We are pleased to welcome you to Tunis for ARI's 10 year celebration, marked by an international conference on the topic of Arab youth and the trajectory of their political and social engagement since 2011.

15.00 - 17.00 "New Definitions and Visions of Youth Action"
Discussion 1

Chair: Dr. Asma Noura, Professor of Political Science and Law, University of El-Manar

Speaker panel: **Saida Ounissi**, Political sociologist and member of Tunisian parliament; **Hassan Abbas**, Syrian academic and President of the Syrian League for Citizenship; **Ross Porter**, Social anthropologist and Yemen specialist. They will provide a conceptual framework for exploring notions of youth action, and the links between revolutionary protest movements and new forms of social and political participation. Q&A with audience.

17.00 Coffee break

17.15 - 19.15 "Youth Actors in Action"
Discussion 2

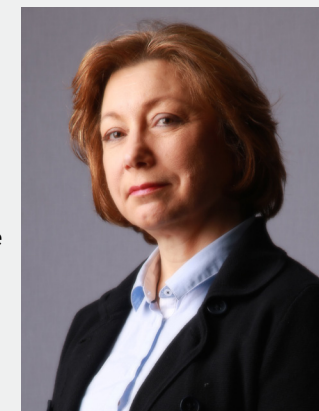
Chair: Dr. Bassma Kodmani, Executive director of ARI

Speaker panel: **Bassem Khalifa**, Environmentalist and social entrepreneur in Egypt; **Jad Shahrour**, Filmmaker, writer, and civil society activist in Lebanon; **Maha Abdelhamid**, Civil rights activist in Tunisia. They will recount their experiences in various domains of social entrepreneurship, and their understandings of new forms of political and social action. Q&A with audience.

19.30 Cocktail reception

Going forward

For the past decade, ARI has been building expertise and a cross-national network of researchers, policy-makers, and stakeholders who are committed to the political transformation of the region. We were the first to conduct ground-breaking research on Arab security sectors and the first ever to engage representatives of security institutions in policy dialogues with civil society actors. We brought together Islamists and secularists in a sustained dialogue on divisive issues, studied the role of the private sector in fostering change, and launched the bi-annual Arab Democracy Index, an exclusive report that measures the democratic transition across the region.



In the post-2011 upheavals and the ensuing transformations of the Arab countries, the value of our structure and approach was made more evident, and we were quick to respond by initiating new strategies. Over the last few years, ARI has significantly increased the production of policy analysis with a broad array of new voices and has started a series of policy dialogues with real agents of change. ARI is continuing its work in the critical domains of the Arab democratic transition, with projects on the role of security institutions in conflict and post-conflict societies, and the governance of diversity and establishment of equal citizenship for all.

ARI along with its partners is perceived as an actor with enough legitimacy to take the lead on instigating key debates, serving as a catalyst for social groups to articulate their agendas and waging the defining battles for democratic change with the activists most committed to upholding our values.

Looking forward, we are determined to increase our efforts to give a younger generation the best chances, nurture their aspirations and accompany them in their various trajectories as they strive to learn, carve new spaces and equip themselves with tools for action, challenging traditional conceptions of politics and social engagement.

None of this would have been possible without the support and trust of our donors. They have allowed us to develop our priorities and our work agenda away from any influences or interests. For this we owe them our reputation as the leading independent think tank of the region.

Bassma Kodmani

The Young Ones: From Dreamers to Actors

As part of its 10 year anniversary event, ARI organized an international conference on the subject of new forms of youth engagement in Tunis on 01 November 2015. Titled “The Young Ones: From Dreamers to Actors,” this event, consisting of two panel discussions with academics and youth actors from across the Arab world, explored new analytical concepts of youth and provided the opportunity to collectively reflect upon the transformation of youth participation and its potential role in political reform with academics and youth actors themselves.



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Among the key points addressed:

- “Youth” should be viewed less as a demographic category than as an analytical concept. Youth signifies social action of non-partisanship, purposeful citizenship, and engagement in societal change.
- Youth political practice involves a broader scope of action aimed at transforming governance and civil-political relations, underpinned by values of non-violence, solidarity, and diffuse power, taking place in seemingly apolitical and non-institutionalised spheres.
- Youth engagement and participation can be promoted through modes of action that are inclusive and detached from traditional contests for power, such as civil society and social entrepreneurship.
- Youth as new actors are in an iterative learning and adaptation process. This includes organisational and political learning, which is reflected in new waves and modes of engagement.
- Radical change takes time. Youth have already made an impact, and although the current political frameworks are difficult, they continue their efforts and are laying the foundations for future dialogue and mobilisation.

Overview



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In the immediate wake of the 2011 uprisings, Arab youth were hailed as the vanguard of democratisation and the deepening of political and civic engagement.

Technologically savvy and affirming a commitment to liberal values, the region's millennials – once hailed as the “Twitter Generation” or “Facebook Youth” – seemed poised to step out of the constraints of economic and political exclusion in order to positively reform their societies and systems of government.

During the heady days of the erstwhile Arab Spring, youth demonstrated a capacity to bridge ideological divides and assemble masses around shared claims for dignity and social justice. They

instigated new forms of protest – and namely occupation and encampment of public squares – that allowed for the refiguring of social relations and renewed sentiments of citizenship and belonging. And they manifested the values of non-violence, solidarity, and diffuse power that became emblematic of their movements and the revolutions themselves. With their transformed repertoires of contention, new modes of mobilisation, and constituent-building capacity, youth seemed to emerge as a dominant political actor in a new Arab world.

Yet what has been witnessed instead in the five years since these uprisings is the resurgence of authoritarianism – and the eclipsing of youth political actors.

Everywhere, traditional politicians are back in charge and youth have been once again relegated to a social category in need of jobs and education as opposed to being a political force to be included in the arena of politics. Hand-in-hand with this return of youth political exclusion has been a process of self-isolation from the political arena: previously prominent youth groups have demonstrated a waning interest in formal political participation and eschew parties and electoral processes. Indeed, youth have seemingly “opted out” and describe feeling marginalized and disaffected by traditional politics and the older generation of political elites.

Popular explanations point to the lack of political experience of youth and their weakness with respect to traditional political forces, as well as the continuation of exclusionary practices preventing integration of younger persons into politics and civil society. In this vein, much of the research agenda has focused on the development of national youth strategies to promote empowerment and inclusion via top-down processes, considering youth as a homogenous category. Yet such approaches rely on a

traditional understanding of youth as social category, failing to capture how the experiences of 2011 have transformed the term “youth” from descriptive to prescriptive.

The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) argues that youth should be understood not as social category but rather as generational practice of politics and civics. In this sense, youth represents a collective interpretation of politics that guides specific forms of action/interaction in the political arena. Youth actors harbour a broader understanding of politics as transforming relations between governance and civil/political society – actions which can take place outside of the traditional political sphere. Youth actors have not disappeared from the public sphere but instead have gravitated towards different forms of engagement. They have moved out of traditional forms of political participation – namely activism and street action – and into new forms of social engagement that appear non-political, such as the cultural sector, mobilisation around single issues and social entrepreneurship.

They continue to pursue their same goals of freedom of expression, equal citizenship, defense of diversity and social justice, yet differentiate themselves from “politics as usual” and contribute to the transformation of their country via other avenues.

Panel 1 Discussion: New Concepts of Youth

The first panel addressed new conceptualisations of the term “youth,” and how the term represents a certain set of values and forms of action born from the 2011 uprisings. The presentations considered how the Arab Spring acted as a catalyst for new forms of youth participation and engagement. Prior to the Arab Spring, youth in countries such as Syria and Yemen were largely removed from the political arena and indeed were prevented from adhering to political life and, in some cases, the democratic resistance.

The mass protest movement, however, allowed for new political awareness to arise that in turn shaped the collective understanding of citizenship and civics, governance and democracy, and state-society relations. Youth participants to the mass protests were afforded a both figurative and literal crash-course in politics: they not only acquired first-hand experience into

political organisation, leadership, and decision-making but also participated in the informal lectures and seminars on political terminology, state systems, and the history of international relations occurring in places like Tahrir Square in Cairo or Change Square in Sana’a. As one presenter, a researcher on Yemeni revolutionary activism, explained, youth became a “macro-revolutionary” concept that served to de-align political elites and bring in the masses around messages of radical change detached from specific political reform programs.

The panelists explored how, through these experiences, “youth” came to signify for these younger cohorts of actors not a particular sociological group but new forms of resistance and new modes of political assembly, standing against partisanship and in favour of civic belonging. Youth action as expressed in the streets



Panel one from left to right; Hassan Abbas, Chair, Asma Nouira, Ross Porter and Saida Ounissi.

and on public squares during the Arab Spring was understood as standing opposite to political parties, a form of action marked not by its ideological convictions and particular political platforms but rather its inclusivity and non-partisan struggle on behalf of all citizens. This new concept of youth also included a strong dedication to non-violence, new forms of communication that bridged the elite/popular divide, and a capacity for finding consensus despite difference of opinion.

One of the main issues investigated in the first panel was what we mean by “youth” or “Arab youth” today. This group’s manner of action is different from that of the previous generation, as is their expectation of what politics can and should achieve. Given that youth participation in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings has largely occurred in domains

other than elections, and given the dichotomizing of youth action vs. partisanship or political parties, a new analytical concept of youth is necessary, along with new tools for evaluating political participation. As one panelist, a Syrian researcher, argued, “youth” can be understood as social action entailing active citizenship for the purposes of societal change. It is prefigurative in nature, meaning that action entails both practicing change in the present as well as struggling for its achievement in the future. Critical to analysis, thus, is not the re-defining of “youth” per se but rather how the utilisation “and indeed revindication” of the term by the actors themselves prescribes political organisation and action. In other words, it is the implication of “youth” that is important for analysis.

One important question addressed to the panelists concerned what



Pictures left to right - Speaker **Bassem Khalifa**, Environmentalist and social entrepreneur in Egypt and **Mohamed El Agati**, Director of ARI member institute Arab Forum for Alternatives, Egypt.

mechanisms exist for increasing the participation of younger generations in politics and reform programs in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. As they argued, models of participation should not be externally emitted. Participation, on the contrary, must correspond with the forms of action and engagement that correspond with the values born on the revolutionary squares. This includes the recreation of spaces of inclusivity, empowerment, and action "for the people." For example, in the Libyan and Yemeni national dialogues, the values of youth needed to be manifested in order to incorporate the younger generation of political actors: it is not just a question of representation, but indeed pursuing processes that are based on trust and not simply a replication of traditional "politics." In other words, it is essential to establish trust with youth actors that political processes will

correspond to their own values and their generational forms of action in order to ensure their participation, especially given that youth formal organisation remains fairly limited in many places.

At the same time, youth still face exclusion and are absent in decision-making roles. In Tunisia, for example, security imperatives and legal provisions have worked against youth forms of action and participation, notably by limiting demonstrations and forms of assembly outside of formalised political institutions. A member of Parliament from the Ennahda party argued forcefully that preventing civil society action serves as a new form of youth political exclusion. Bringing younger generations into political parties may be worthwhile, as participation in formal politics is an important manner to transmit bureaucratic knowledge. Parties can also learn from

youth by engaging in youth forms of action, allowing for political learning and adaption to move in both directions. To avoid the exclusion of youth as political actors, politics should start in childhood and civic and political education should be incorporated into school curricula. One important conclusion of this first panel, nonetheless, was the acknowledgement that "youth" is not a stable concept; the values and forms of action that younger actors attribute as representing youth are changing as the political and social climates of the Arab world are evolving. The value of non-violence, for example, is rapidly disappearing from the repertoire of youth action in places such as Yemen. In this sense, youth should be treated as a dynamic concept in a dialectic relationship with the social-historical context. Such a conceptual approach sheds light on how "youth" directs political participation and engagement by recognizing its inherently heterogeneous and non-static quality.



In conversation left to right, speaker **Saida Ounissi**, **Souahir Belhassan**, **Larbi Chouikha** and Tunisian journalists



Panel 2 Discussion: Youth Actors in Action

The second panel consisted of the testimonies and personal stories of youth, and their move from political activism to social engagement and participation. The presentations by the panelists reflected the particular understandings of politics and of the sources and avenues for societal change that mark this new generation of actors.

For some, the emergence as private individual to social and political actors was not the result of the 2011 uprisings alone; instead, activism and civil society participation has antecedents in progressive and rights-based actions in the decade leading up to the Arab Spring. This includes for example participation in demonstrations for the Palestinian cause and anti-pollution community projects – all actions which served to create a new landscape for civil society and youth organisation, much like the “You Stink” movement in Lebanon today.

In describing their own forms of engagement, one common characteristic that emerged among the early youth movements was their informal nature based around social networks as opposed to organisational models. This includes features that today are well-known hallmarks of the youth actions during the 2011 uprising: the lack of a well-defined leader, the horizontal decision-making processes, the disinterest

in institutionalisation – and the associated difficulties with achieving long-term actions and results. To this final point, panelists admit that they did not necessarily have political leaders to propose in the post-2011 context, or policy recommendations to make. Yet they wonder if too much was not expected of them as well – change did occur, and expecting ready-made solutions from youth actors is perhaps unrealistic.

Radical and profound social and political change takes time, and may require more than one political era to be achieved. As they explained, such a realisation is compounded by the fact that decisions taken by interim governments in the wake of authoritarian ousters did not necessarily correspond with their aspirations, creating unfavourable political frameworks for their actions today. As a result, youth left the political sector – seen as largely linked to persistent corruption. Crucially, however, this does not mean that they abandoned their dreams of societal



Panel two from left to right; **Bassem Khalifa**, Chair **Dr Bassma Kodmani**, **Jad Shahrouf**, and **Maha Abdelhamid**.

change altogether; rather, it meant the migration of youth into vastly different sectors seeking to develop social and economic alternatives outside of major political junctions. For the panelists, working in different sectors other than traditional politics allows youth to connect individuals in new networks and provide the organisational infrastructure necessary for swift action during future political junctions.

Promisingly, the panelists testify to the lessons learned from 2011 and the failure to institutionalise revolutionary gains. In the Syrian city of Raqaa, for example, activists have succeeded in extending their audience and capacity to stay connected at the global level; in Lebanon, the current mass protest movement holds regular meetings in order to lay the foundations for future dialogue between disperse

ideological groups and parties.

Moving forward, three domains of youth engagement in the Arab world today merit further study:

- The possibility of the joint venture instead of the NGO as organisational model;
- The types of structures necessary for sustaining youth participation;
- The mechanisms that must be established to guarantee the independence and autonomy of youth action.

Research into these questions, and the development of strategies and Action-Research programs with youth movements, can positively contribute to the long-term viability of Arab youth political participation.

