**Youth in Arab Societies**

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**Summary**

Youth in Arab societies are at the center of political and social debates with social scientists divided over two main questions: Are youth a product of modernity? Are they a social category and, if so, how do we define this category? The author reviews various strands of literature and makes the following points:

1. Youth are a product of three historical and social phenomena: industrialization, urbanization and education. Approaches to this focus on different aspects: the position and role of youth and tensions with adults due to their simultaneous aspirations for autonomy, their dependence on their parents and general expectations concerning adherence to social norms and rules. Another approach focuses on culture and highlights discrepancies between the culture of the middle class and that of marginalized youth. Yet a later approach has focused on "youth as student" due to the dominance of the middle class and proliferation of schools and advanced education. Finally, economic issues of youth integration and exclusion began to take precedence over other topics, which has also contributed to the sociology of work and institutional sociology. The definitions of youth as a category have often been manipulated for political, statistical, legal and administrative purposes. This explains the recent tendency among some researchers to refer instead to "the transition to adulthood" associated with entry into the workforce and separation from one's family of birth.

2. The author goes on to address the question whether Arab youth are "a promise or a menace?" In the Arab context, youth have been mobilized for different political agendas, thus they have been variously considered as agents of political and social change, as the bearers of values of modernity and resistors of patriarchal order but also as "a social problem." She states that in the Arab countries the general discourse tends to focus on "the youth crisis." This has been exacerbated by demographic changes leading to large numbers of young people in the labor and housing market, youth unemployment, a marriage crisis and general social exclusion. With regard to issues of exclusion, the author questions whether studies on the political participation of youth do not impose certain understandings and expectations about politics, democracy, peace etc.  This imposes certain expectations concerning the political role on young people which, if they do not follow it, projects them as passive and not integrated into their societies. She points to a more recent body of literature that focuses on youth as actors, examining their mobility and participation in different spheres, including a new "sociology of youth mobilization" that is focusing on the mobilization of youth for the public interest instead of mobilization incited by major national events.

3. The author questions the use of identities and labels for youth such as "Westernized" and "Islamist" and points out the absence of a gender dimension in many of these labels and discussions. She remarks that young people are now following new trajectories and that information technology is opening new horizons for young people.


The author concludes that Arab research on youth is moving in three directions: a focus on "crisis" particularly with regard to integrating youth in the labor market, a focus on identities in a changing world and a focus on political participation. The main issue, in her opinion, is how to deal with youth not as a threat but as a promise and how to avoid projecting an ideal image of youth based on comparisons with previous generations as well as on categories such as "unemployed", "Islamist", "Westernized".

The author then reviews national and regional projects on youth as well as initiatives by the U.N. and stresses the importance of coordination between various research efforts at least to avoid duplication and to critically examine prevailing categories.