

YOUTH AND YOUTH CULTURE

in the Contemporary Middle East



Edited by Jørgen Bæk Simonsen

Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus

III · 2005

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Graphic design and cover: Jørgen Sparre

Cover: Photo by Kirsten Thun, the border between Syria and Lebanon

The Arabic text in translation "Changes will come"

ISBN 87 7934 885 8

Aarhus University Press

Langelandsgade 177

DK-8200 Aarhus N

www.unipress.dk

Published with financial support from

The Danish Research Council for the Humanities

and Enkefru Plums Mindefond

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Introduction

Youth, History and Change in the Modern Arab World

JØRGEN BÆK SIMONSEN, *The Danish Institute in Damascus*

Social scientists and historians working with social history have defined youth as a social construction and as a period between two very different times in life: childhood and adulthood. The precise definition of youth differs considerably but most commonly includes people between 15 and 30. Despite this definition, however, 'youth' in the general debate extends well beyond the borders originally related to the specific age-period of youth. In most parts of the modern industrialised world, people in their 30s, 40s, and even 50s, consider themselves young, thus eroding all serious analytical meaning of the word.

During the 20th century youth has been analysed from a number of different perspectives. In psychology, research has focused on the ways that children when reaching a certain age gradually try to emancipate themselves from their parents; in sociology the norms and ways in which young people organise themselves socially have been analysed; scholars interested in socio-linguistics have analysed the language(s) used by youth; social scientists have concentrated on the drive to change which is embedded in youth, and economists and people working in public relations and advertising have for decades been aware of youth as consumers.

In the expanding and developing multicultural Europe of the 21st century, much focus is invested on the challenge that young people from migrant-parents expose, *vis à vis* traditional norms for social interaction with others. In a new context there is a re-awakening and repetition of a number of fears held by the older generation pertaining to youth. During the 1950s the concept of the angry young man was widespread in European literature and theatre; during the 1960s young criminal gangs, left to themselves on street-corners while their parents were working, were of common concern; and now the same fears are linked to young people with family roots outside Europe.

In political ideology, youth has always been of importance because it could be manipulated and socially moulded to realise a different future. The various national movements in Europe during the 19th century offer an endless number of examples of this. The same became prevalent in the rest of the world, also in the Arab Middle East as indicated in

some of the articles in this book (cf. Jakob-Skovgaard Petersen, Peter Wien and Michael Irving Jensen). During the 20th century fascist and communist regimes were engaged in efforts to manipulate the new man or the new woman by socialising young people to expose the social norms of the political ideology of which they were part. This effort has also been attempted in a number of modern Arab countries where special regime-supporting organisations for youth have been trying to do the same. The theme of youth and the new nation state are analysed in a Turkish perspective by Leyla Neyzi, and in an Iranian perspective by Farian Sabahi and Claus V. Petersen.

As the analytical concept of youth gained importance and was generally accepted as a period with its own cultural values and norms, social scientists began to analyse how social change in several cases was linked to youth. From the middle of the 1960s and through to the middle of the 1970s, Europe and the US experienced a decade with dramatic social change initiated by youth. Young people openly challenged traditional social rules and norms. At the political level, groups of young people strongly criticised the existing inequalities of the world and this has remained an integral part of political life ever since. The challenges embedded in Arab youth are analysed in the articles written by Ikran Eum and Ines Baune, based on anthropological fieldwork in Fes, Morocco and Cairo, Egypt.

In spite of differences in defining the exact lower and upper limits of the age-group labelled youth, youth as a social group in the modern contemporary Middle East is of growing importance. The success of most modern nation-states in the region in eradicating infant mortality, reducing the number of deadly diseases traditionally taking the life of many children, as well as the state's success in extending the life expectancy of the adult part of the total population, has dramatically changed the demographic composition of the population in all areas of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. For decades to come, the demographic change will pose a number of serious challenges to all political systems in the region as well as the rest of the world, and for decades to come the governments in the Middle East will be challenged as their new citizens demand work, a place to live, and entertainment for the expanding leisure time embedded in a modern way of life.

In general, some 50% of the total population of the Arab World is 18 years of age or under. The governments of the Middle East have tried to combat the increase of the population in different ways. Although, these efforts have resulted generally in a decreasing birthrate, the dramatic imbalance already in existence makes the future look complicated anyway. For decades to come the number of new jobs needed to absorb young people of both gender who wish to enter the workforce will be higher than any government can possibly offer, adding to the many social challenges facing the societies of the Middle East. Also, add to this the demands of the older section of the population for political reforms and a right to take part in the decision-making process.

The Arab Human Development Report 2002 on Creating Opportunities for Future

Generations and the 2003 report on *Building a Knowledge Society*, both analyse a number of the inter-related problems linked to the demographic imbalance. The focus of both reports is on youth, indicating the importance of the present groups of youth in the Arab world; groups from which the future leaders will come.

The Middle East is faced with many challenges, and this volume presents a number of articles on various themes pertaining to youth in the contemporary Middle East. The international society of scholars have not invested much interest so far in the youth of the Middle East, and only very few books have been written on this important subject.¹

The articles published in this volume of the *Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus*, Vol. III, were originally presented at a conference in Damascus in December 2002 organised by The Danish Institute in Damascus and The University of Damascus. The conference was sponsored by *The Danish Research Council for the Humanities* and *The Novo Foundation* in Copenhagen. The publication of the book has been made possible by financial support from *The Danish Research Council for the Humanities* and the *Enkefru Plums Mindefond*.

Damascus, October 2004

Jørgen Bak Simonsen

NOTES

- 1 Cf. Roel Meijer: *Alienation or Integration of Arab Youth*, London: Curzon (2000) and Ali Akbar Mahdi (ed.): *Teen Life in the Middle East*, Westport: Greenwood Press (2003).