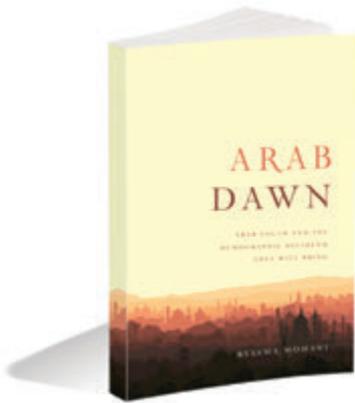


Young and Still Restless



Bessma Momani

Arab Dawn

Arab Youth and the Demographic Dividend They Will Bring

University of Toronto Press, 2015, 176 pp., \$21.95 (paper).

For those readers who have consumed little information about the Arab region and its youth between the Arab-Spring-Fires-up-the-Arab-Street news cycle and the ISIS-Brings-back-the-12th-Century news cycle, *Arab Dawn* by Bessma Momani could indeed be the uplifting, hopeful antidote she hopes it will be.

For those with a more nuanced view of the region and its youth demographic, Momani's book is a light addition to the tiny genre of literature on the future prospects of Arab youth, which includes Christopher Schroeder's *Startup Rising* (2013) and Tarik Yousef's *Generation in Waiting* (2009). Schroeder's book offers richer, more inspiring portraits of entrepreneurs grappling with the region's problems to build the change they want to see in their societies (disclaimer: my company is profiled in the book); Yousef's contains deeper, more meaningful policy recommendations for the region's economic development challenges.

What Momani's book lacks in depth, however, it makes up for in new statistics and anecdotes about the region's youth. It may come as a surprise to some readers that despite the negative news cycles, the young people who took to the streets are still agitating for change. Their efforts do

not always make the front pages in the West, but the Saudi women who post YouTube videos of themselves driving their own cars around Riyadh and the Egyptian TV personality who exposes cultural hypocrisy in hidden-camera episodes are continuing the struggle.

These stories are not as dramatic as those of demonstrators toppling dictators, but given the pace of political reform we've seen in most of the postrevolution countries, they could prove to have a greater impact.

On religion, Momani can be praised for not trying to use statistics to tell us that Arab youth are more secular or more moderate than older generations. She tells it as it is: it's complicated. Yes, 35 percent of entrepreneurs are women, and 80 percent of men think that women should be able to work outside the home—but 94 percent of women in Egypt wear a head scarf, twice as many as in their mother's generation.

Some of the surveys and polls Momani cites that were published before Facebook's 2009 "Like" button release should probably be discarded. Joking aside, the average three hours a day Arab young people spend on social networks has profoundly affected how they see the world and their place in it—even if they're sitting in a blighted neighborhood in Cairo or Tripoli or Amman. This may be the first generation to embrace modern ideas and attitudes as a result of interacting with global culture *online*—bottom-up modernization independent of economic progress or government-led reform.

How these globally connected young people will respond to ever-rising unemployment is not addressed by Momani. She tells us the scary truth: 100 million additional jobs are needed by 2030. But her economic policy recommendations seem out of touch with present realities. For governments to provide more finance, infrastructure, and hospitality jobs in the private sector, as Momani writes, is simply not enough.

It's not enough, for two reasons. The economic growth of the region will

not support the job growth required. 100 million jobs by 2030 is just what is required to maintain present employment levels; unemployment is currently at 28 percent among Arab youth and 43 percent among Arab females, double the global average, according to the Arab Monetary Fund. With oil prices having dropped more than 50 percent in the last year and few experts predicting a rise back above \$100 a barrel, it is unlikely that the GCC's economies will

The young people are still agitating for change.

help pick up the slack. The ravages of war on Syria, Libya, and Yemen mean a lost generation in those countries: the IMF's Masood Ahmed has said that it will take 20 years of 3 percent annual growth for Syria to reach prewar income levels.

Second, the very nature of work is changing, and the skills economies will value are changing. The coming artificial intelligence revolution will leave many people everywhere behind—not just in the developing world.

The book does contain a seed of optimism, though the author doesn't connect the dots for us. The Arab world is a wellspring of creativity. One in five Arabs can be categorized as a creative professional, and the skills they possess are rising in value. Within the life spans of the youth Momani portrays, machines will best human beings at just about everything—including building new machines, both the hardware and the software.

But where machines will have a harder time catching up with us humans is in our creativity, empathy, and ability to make human connections. This is the wealth of Arab youth, and this is where hope can be found.

May Habib
CEO and cofounder of Qordoba,
an enterprise SaaS platform for
globalizing digital content