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BOOK REVIEW

ARAB DAWN: ARAB YOUTH AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

THEY WILL BRING BY BESSMA MOMANI

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS, 2015. 176 PAGES

\$45 (HARDCOVER), \$21.95 (PAPER)

ISBN 978-1442628564

In *Arab Dawn*, Bessma Momani offers a nuanced picture of the everyday lives of young people throughout the Arab Middle East. She argues that there are important fundamental differences between today's Arab youth and those of prior generations, and that young people will be driving change in the region. Targeted to a Western audience, including those unfamiliar with the Middle East, *Arab Dawn* counters a media narrative that too often portrays the Arab world as inherently conservative, violent, authoritarian, and misogynistic. Indeed, amid a political environment characterized by the reemergence of a "clash of civilizations" discourse and a media environment rife with negative Muslim and Arab stereotypes, Momani's *Arab Dawn* offers a sliver of hope.

Momani is unapologetic and unpretentious in describing the book's goal. She seeks to present an approachable, atheoretical, and optimistic window onto the experiences of today's Arab young people, and in this she succeeds admirably. She builds on decades of personal experience in the region, seamlessly weaving together engaging anecdotes, public opinion data, and interviews with young people from Morocco to the United Arab Emirates.

The book is organized around four broad themes: bread, freedom, identity, and circularity. Momani describes the macro-level changes currently affecting the Arab world and its youth, including globalization, rising education levels, communications technology, urbanization, and neoliberalism. She argues that, due in part to these changes, today's young Arabs are already better educated, more engaged in civic and political life, and more open to multicultural identities than prior generations.

"Bread," the now infamous term first heard during Egypt's 2011 revolution, speaks to Arab young people's demands for economic security and prosperity. Momani points out the impact of rising education rates, which are leading to greater female participation in the labor market and a new era of consumerism in the Middle East. She is optimistic about increasing entrepreneurship, including among young Arab women.

“Freedom” describes the call for a new social contract from young people in the Arab states. These youth are pushing away from the postindependence contract that curtailed civil and political rights in the name of stability and development, and are calling for more open, inclusive, and democratic states. Momani highlights young people’s commitment to democratic values and their increased participation in the public sphere, driven in part by new media content and the open sharing of ideas.

“Identity” drives home the point that today’s Arab youth cannot be viewed in terms of the binary identities of the past. Many see no contradiction in being simultaneously religious and modern and readily embrace the tenets of multiculturalism and global citizenship.

Finally, “circularity” addresses the high migration rate among Arab youth and argues that their mobility creates a conduit for the flow of ideas. Drawing on the term “social remittances,” Momani has found that Arab youth who study and work abroad are more connected than ever before to their home communities, and that these young migrants serve as a source of modern ideas and values, such as multiculturalism and respect for the environment.

As a short introduction to those unfamiliar with the region, *Arab Dawn* would be an excellent choice for an undergraduate class on globalization, youth cultures, or the Middle East. It also would be a helpful and enjoyable read for professionals, including those working in the field of education in emergencies who are relocating to jobs in the Middle East and North Africa.

On a different note, those steeped in a disciplinary tradition that looks for theoretical explanations might find the book’s analysis wanting, as in many ways it poses more questions than it answers. As one example, when Momani describes young Arabs viewing themselves as global citizens, I could not help but wonder what they mean when they use that phrase.

I recognize that such questions are beyond the scope of this book, in which Momani provides a background for future research and interrogation. There is a particular need for more research on how the personal experiences of Arab youth in the region vary in keeping with their different backgrounds. While Momani certainly recognizes that young people differ in terms of nationality, gender, and class, this is not the focus of her analysis.

For readers of the *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, there is an elephant in the room that is hard to view with optimism: instability. We know there is tremendous political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa region, ranging from outright conflict in Syria and Yemen to a political crackdown on civil society in Egypt, as well as a broader form of instability that stems from declining oil prices in the Arab Gulf States and concerns over succession in Oman and Saudi Arabia.

In her conclusion, Momani cites statistics showing that the vast majority of Arab youth across the region do not support sectarian rhetoric and view ISIS as fundamentally anti-Muslim. She finds this large-scale rejection of the terrorist group a source of optimism. While not disagreeing with her views, I do wonder what the current instability will mean for today's Arab youth, whose attitudes are still being shaped by their life experiences. Indeed, the number of Arab expatriates discussed in the chapter on circularity has grown significantly: since 2011, almost one million Syrians have fled to Europe and North America, not as educated migrants but as refugees, and many millions more have moved to neighboring Arab nations. I cannot help but wonder what effect the region's instability and ongoing violent conflicts will have on this current generation of Arab youth.

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