

The Rise of the Arab Youth Paradigm: A Critical Analysis of the Arab Human Development Report 2016

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This article offers a critical analysis of the *Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2016*, that was released by the United Nations Development Programme in November 2016. *AHDR 2016* represents the return of the Arab Human Development project that had been interrupted by the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. It also epitomizes the Arab youth paradigm that has increasingly come to frame development and security discourse in the region. While there is much that is familiar in *AHDR 2016*, there are

also concerning developments: a historical revisionism that holds Arab youth responsible for the Arab Spring and the Arab Spring responsible for the Arab Winter that followed, and a new trend that views not just Arab youth deficits as a dangerous threat to regional and global security, but Arab youth abilities and surfeits as well.

Keywords: Arab Human Development Report; Arab Spring; youth; youth bulge; generational conflict; over-education

Introduction

In November 2016, the long overdue *Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2016* was finally released by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). With the subtitle *Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, *AHDR 2016* was the first of a total of six Arab Human Development Reports that have been produced since 2002 to focus exclusively on the question of youth in the region, looking at youth in relation to civic participation, education, work, gender, health, war and conflict, mobility and migration. As Sophie de Caen, Director of the Regional Bureau for Arab States in UNDP, said at the launch of *AHDR 2016*: “The wave of uprisings that have swept across the Arab region since 2011 has shown us that we can no longer treat young people in the Arab region as passive dependents or a generation in waiting.” Fadlo Khuri, president of the American University of Beirut, who spoke at the launch event of *AHDR 2016*, said that “I look at our youth with optimism because I think there is a sense of resiliency and a sense that this youth is not waiting for the grand intervention of the western states, or even the great universities, or the United Nations, to save them. They want us to help them; that is very evident in this report. But they don’t want

saving. They want support, they want opportunity, they want to save themselves" (quoted in Jafari)

While AHDR 2016, like previous reports in the AHDR series, has received widespread coverage in the media, and attention and support from a range of different development and policy organisations, it demands far more critical attention than it has been given to date. This article thus offers a close, critical reading of AHDR 2016, situating it in the context of the AHDR series as a whole, but also in relation to what we might call the rise of the Arab youth paradigm in development policy and discourse in the Arab region, a paradigm that increasingly shapes development policies and practices across the region, and that impacts the lives not just of Arab youth but people from all generations in the Arab world. AHDR 2016 thus follows in the footsteps of a growing number of parallel reports that have focused on Arab youth as a key development concern over the past decade, including the Brookings Center's *Middle East Youth Bulge: Challenge or Opportunity?*, the RAND Corporation's *Initiative for Middle Eastern Youth* and the United Nations' *The Millennium Development Goals in the Arab Region 2007: A Youth Lens*. This paper argues that AHDR 2016 epitomizes the

Arab youth and development paradigm. However, while there is much that is familiar in the report, there are also some concerning new developments: a historical revisionism that holds Arab youth responsible for both the Arab Spring and the Arab Winter that followed, and a new trend that views not just Arab youth deficits as a dangerous threat to regional and global security, but Arab youth abilities and surfeits as well.

The Arab Human Development Report Regime

The Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR) have been produced by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) since 2002, with a total of six reports (*AHDR 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2009; 2016*) appearing over the past fifteen years. Each report focuses on a key topic considered to be central to development concerns in the region - knowledge (*AHDR 2003*), freedom (*AHDR 2004*), gender (*AHDR 2005*), human security (*AHDR 2009*), and most recently, youth (*AHDR 2016*) - and typically proceeds by identifying a series of "challenges," "obstacles" or "problems" that confront the Arab world and proposing a set of recommended "principles" and policy recommendations. While the UN produced several national and subnational development reports on

Arab states prior to 2002, it explained the launch of the regional development reports by arguing that "recent events and tragedies" in the Arab world meant "the time is right for a study that assesses the current state of human development across the region and offers some concrete suggestions on how to accelerate progress in the future." It stated that the goal of the reports was to spur "discussion and debate by policymakers, practitioners and the general public alike" and "help Arab countries to continue to advance the fundamental purpose of development" (Brown, *ADHR 2002* iii-iv). It is notable that the Arab region is the only region in the world for which the UNDP has felt it necessary to produce regionally focused development reports (although the organization has produced global development reports on an annual basis since 1990).

When launching its AHDR series, the UNDP emphasized from the beginning that the reports would not be written by "normal, internal UN authors," but instead would be "authentic" works produced "by Arabs for Arabs," released simultaneously in both Arabic and English (Brown, *ADHR 2003* i). UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch Brown (iv) notes in his foreword to the first AHDR that "it is independent experts from the region rather than the UNDP who have

placed their societies under a sympathetic but critical examination ... in a way that perhaps only Arabs should," and insists the report "is not the grandstanding of outsiders but an honest, if controversial, view through the mirror." The use of Arab researchers based in the Arab world for producing the AHDR series has continued ever since. The release of each AHDR has been accompanied by high profile public launches and large media campaigns - "great fanfare," as Levine puts it. AHDR 2016, for example, was launched at the American University of Beirut in November 2016 in an event that brought together "150 participants including youth; civil society and women's organizations; government representatives; parliamentarians; and the private sector, from across the Arab region" (UNDP, *AHDR 2016*); and then again at follow-up launch events in Stockholm in March 2017 and Brussels in April 2017, in collaboration with the European Commission and the EastWest Institute (UNDP, *AHDR 2016*).

In many ways, the UNDP's Arab Human Development Report series has been an enormously successful enterprise. All of the series reports have been widely used - the UNDP records over a million downloads of each report - and just as importantly, have tended to be primary sources

quoted frequently not just by academics in and of the region, but Arab business and political leaders as well (Amin; Traboulsi; Trebilcock). There are a number of likely reasons for this: the extensive media promotion of the reports by the UNDP and other organizations, the status of legitimacy provided by the combination of UNDP sponsorship and Arab authorship, and the fact that the reports are one of the few sites where large amounts of statistical data on the Arab world have been made freely and easily accessible (Abu Lughod, Amin; Bayat, Trebilcock). The AHDR series, therefore, is particularly important to pay close and critical attention to because it has become so central to the political construction of knowledge in and about the Arab region. Bayat argues that "no comparable Arab document in recent memory has been as much debated, commended and contested as the AHDR;" (1227) while Trebilcock claims that the AHDR has "attracted more attention and controversy than any other official studies of development in recent years." (1)

Despite, or perhaps precisely because of their extended success and influence, the AHDR series has attracted a small but growing number of critics over the fifteen years that it has been in existence.

Criticisms have focused on the way in which the AHDR series has been produced, the uses of the series, particularly by western governments and international organizations, and more substantively, the content and claims of the series, in particular the representations of the Arab world that the series helps to promote. In contradiction to UNDP claims of the independent and indigenous nature of AHDR authorship, Arab authors who have worked on the AHDR series over the past decade and a half have repeatedly complained of censorship, editing and lack of overall control. Islah Jad, who was one of the authors of ADHR 2005, felt compelled to issue a statement that she "is not fully the owner of the report" (Jad); the release of ADHR was actually delayed by the UNDP because some of its claims "were politically controversial and not in line with the organization" (*AHDR 2005* vi). Likewise, with AHDR 2016, the authors of one chapter wrote publicly to say that they were "surprised by the final edits" of their chapters, claiming that "ambassadors of different countries were involved in the editing of the report" (Al-Ali et al.).

The use of the AHDR series by the United States, other western governments and international organisations has also caused considerable criticism and suspi-

cion. The first AHDR was directly commissioned by the United States government in the context of the war on terror (personal interview with Clovis Maksoud, April 2006). The series overall has been used as a platform for international intervention in the region, widely quoted by US and EU leaders and officials to legitimate and support the various programmes and policy reforms they were sponsoring throughout the Arab World (Baroudi; Trebilcock). Bayat argues that policy personnel in the west and notably the US used the AHDR to call “for an urgent change in the region and yet believe that change will not come from within, but from without, and by force.”

Finally, a number of scholars have focused on the problematic representation of the Arab world that is promoted by the AHDR series. The series has tended to embrace a culturalist framework of analysis, in which in which culture is central and constitutive in explaining the demise of human development in the Arab region (Abu-Lughod; Baroudi; Said; Traboulsi). Most of the reports refer to a set of core and unchanging “traditional” values and practices that are said to be at odds with the practices of modernity and pressures and forces of a globalizing world. This ignores the extent to which “traditions”

are themselves constantly reimagined and reinvented as a constitutive part of the modern, globalized world (Lavergne; Traboulsi). Bayat argues that the AHDR series represents the region as “something very different, a unique cultural entity which does not fit into conventional frames of analysis.” Further, the AHDR focuses on institutional and cultural deficits that are said to separate the Arab world from every other global region and claims that these deficits (in knowledge, freedom, democracy, women’s empowerment, etc.) form the center of its social, economic, and political backwardness (Hasso). The sweeping invocation of gaps, lacks, and deficits between the Arab and western worlds perpetuates ungrounded Orientalist stereotypes of the region. Traboulsi claims that the region is presented as a set of “lacks, lags and deficits, to an extent that one does not know what the Arab region has, it is only what it does not have that is presented” (see also Abu-Lughod).

In general, there is an absence of attention to and criticism of external interventions in the ADHR series, either from the US and other powers in the current period, or of colonial powers during the period of European imperialism and colonialism. Amin explains the denunciation of the

report by many Arab intellectuals by its “exclusive emphasis on internal sources of decline as one-sided, totally ignoring the role of colonialism and imperialist intervention causing the developmental malaise of the Arab people” (see also Baroudi). When we turn from the AHDR series’ analysis of problems to its proposed solutions for the Arab region, we find that the reports are broadly linked to an ideological model of neoliberal development. In report after report, the series strongly promotes the (further) liberalization of Arab national economies and societies in order to secure good governance, growth, and consequently, human development. Amin argues that both AHDR 2002 and AHDR 2003 begin with a culturalist analysis of the Arab region and end up with a neoliberal solution. Abu-Lughod and Adely both argue that the AHDR-promoted policies for women’s empowerment are neoliberal in orientation. Traboulsi also talks about the AHDR series as ending with a “neoliberal wishlist” as solutions for development problems in the Arab world.

The Rise of the Arab Youth Paradigm

The *Arab Human Development Report 2016* needs to be situated not just within the context of previous Arab Human Development Reports, but more generally within the context of a broad political and

ideological discourse that has focused on and indeed, helped to construct the idea and central importance of Arab youth in the region's policy and development debates. As youth studies research has noted, the social category and identity of youth is not universal, and has tended to be most relevant in the wealthy countries of the global North (Boyden, et al.; Brown, Larson and Saraswathi; Finn; Griffin; Nsamenang). Up until a few decades ago, the social category of youth was of limited relevance in most of the countries in the Arab region. There were few, if any, NGOs working with youth specifically, and nation state youth policies and ministries were essentially unheard of; academic research rarely considered the issue of Arab youth, as studies of class, family and faith were much more central (Al-Amin).

All of this began to change from the 1990s onwards for two reasons. First, youth has become increasingly central to development discourse, policy and practice, not just in the Arab world but on a worldwide scale. This shift is perhaps best marked by the World Bank's decision to dedicate its 2007 *World Development Report* (subtitled *Development and the Next Generation*) entirely to the question of the place of youth in global development agendas. Second, both youth and devel-

opment together have increasingly come to be seen as central to regional and global security concerns (LaGraffe; Sukarieh and Tannock, "The Global Securitization"). While this has also been a global phenomenon, it has focused in particular on Arab and Muslim youth, spurred on by the participation of young Arabs in the 9/11 attacks in 2001 in the United States and, more recently, in enabling the growth of ISIS in Syria and Iraq (Bzina and Gray). As a result of these shifts, both the Arab region and other parts of the world have seen a phenomenal explosion of state-led youth policy initiatives, youth-focused development projects, youth-oriented NGOs and youth policy documents (African Union; ILO; USAID; World Bank, *Children & Youth*). In Jordan, for example, NGOs tailored to youth grew in number from one in 1990 to 15 in 1998, and to 83 in 2014.

Why has youth become a central development and security concern in the Arab world and beyond? According to AHDR 2016 (and other parallel reports in the youth, security and development discourse), there are two straightforward explanations for this. One factor is the presence of rapid demographic change: the extreme growth in the numbers of youth in Arab societies and emergence of

what is commonly referred to as a "youth bulge." AHDR 2016 thus notes that there has been an "unprecedented" demographic "wave," "mass" and "momentum" in the Arab world caused by the fact that "young people between the ages of fifteen and 29 make up nearly a third of the [Arab] region's population" (22). "Never before has the region had such a large share of youth," the report explains, as "youth of the ages 15-29 make up around 30% of the population, or some 105 million people" (22). The second factor is the widespread marginalization, disempowerment and exclusion of youth in public and private sector decision making throughout the Arab region. As AHDR 2016 claims:

The exclusion of youth is pervasive throughout the Arab region.... The mass disenfranchisement of youth constitutes one of the key stumbling blocks in the development process in Arab countries. Young people have not been recognized as legitimate agents of change, nor have they been empowered to fulfil this responsibility.... [Y]outh are formally excluded politically by middle-aged and elderly men, who dominate society because of traditional norms and deeply entrenched state-sponsored economic practices. Youth also face large entry barriers to jobs, marriage and housing, where older

groups enjoy privileges, largely acquired under public programmes during the oil booms. (32, 170)

However, despite such an appealing narrative of youth empowerment and concern, this positive and positivist account needs to be looked at carefully and critically, as there are a number of problems and concerns with the new youth development and security paradigm. First, as can be seen in the quotation above, the youth paradigm foregrounds claims of generational conflict and inequality as central dimensions of inequality in Arab societies, while backgrounding other issues of social class, race, gender, religion or regional relations of inequality between the global North and South. Attention is focused on the exclusion of youth by “middle-aged and elderly men,” and the inequities of “older groups” enjoying “privileges” that the young do not have access to. Second, the youth paradigm is closely linked with a strong attack on the public sector – “state-sponsored economic practices” and oil-funded “public programme” privileges in the above quotation – and corresponding promotion of the private sector. In fact, the youth paradigm poses an alleged affinity between the core interests of youth (getting a good education to help them get

good jobs) and those of private sector elites (securing a reliable and productive workforce for their enterprises). The attack on the Arab public sector is a constant throughout the document. Since independence, the report claims, most Arab countries have “pursued a model of development that is dominated by the public sector and turns governments into providers of first and last resort” (175). The domination of the public sector is claimed to be the cause of the lack of strong enterprises and culture of entrepreneurship: “for the public sector has either crowded out and manipulated the private sector or forged uncompetitive and monopolistic alliances, while inhibiting the development of viable systems of public finance” (29). The solution proposed by AHDR 2016, in the name of empowering youth, is very much a standard neoliberal wish list, that includes labour market deregulation (73), capital control and trade liberalization (30), and privatization and marketization (29).

Finally, despite the ostensible embrace and celebration of youth, the youth paradigm also promotes negative stereotypes of youth as problems, pathologies and in deficit. One of the core concerns of AHDR 2016 is that the combination of a youth bulge and youth exclusion has led to a prevalence of “frustration, helplessness,

alienation and dependency” among Arab youth, and it is Arab youth discontent with their social and economic position that has become “an explosive and radicalizing mixture” that threatens the entire region (5, 22). More generally, one of the effects of promoting a youth framework of analysis for addressing social, cultural, political and economic problems in Arab societies is that social development is presented as being dependent upon the individual development of young Arabs. Thus, emphasis is placed on extending and reforming formal and informal education systems in order to provide youth with the knowledge and skills (that they are presumably now lacking and that are causing them problems) that will enable them to succeed in civil society, the labor market and the political sphere. According to AHDR 2016, “only a small minority of youth” have “adequate skills to meet the demand of labour markets;” while most Arab youth suffer from “limited skills,” “inadequate skills” and “poor human capital endowments” (24, 31). AHDR 2016 is consequently littered with calls for a wide range of educational reforms that will meet the needs of Arab youth and Arab employers alike, such as “reorganizing university curricula, assuring quality tertiary education and expanding vocational training programs” (76), expanding “career

guidance and matching services,” and “supporting entrepreneurship skills amongst youth” (83). While such kinds of educational interventions may well provide a range of benefits for individual young Arabs across the region, if social, political and economic problems are not primarily caused by educational skills deficits among Arab youth – which, as will be discussed below, is what AHDR 2016 itself often seems to argue – then these problems are not likely to be solved by educational interventions either (see Sukarieh and Tannock, *Youth Rising* 55-74).

The Arab Spring and the New Historical Revisionism

AHDR 2016 offers a third account of why youth has become a central development and security concern in the Arab world today. The combination of the youth demographic bulge and youth economic and political marginalization has led to youth (allegedly) playing a growing role in social and political unrest throughout the region. “The events of 2011 in the Arab region have refocused attention on the pivotal role of youth ... in society,” AHDR 2016 states, and “the wave of protests which has swept through a number of Arab countries since 2011 with youth at the forefront” constitutes a “key argument” for why a focus on youth has become such a

social, economic and political imperative (5, 7). Thus, according to AHDR 2016:

While this report represents a natural progression from earlier Arab Human Development Reports, it has been drafted within quite a unique context. Since 2011, several countries in the region witnessed uprisings, and the region has experienced the most rapid expansion in war and violent conflict among all global regions over the past decade. (170)

In this respect, AHDR 2016 is part of a much broader set of reports, books and articles that has focused recently on youth as a threat to social, economic and political stability and security, both in the Arab world and beyond. These include, for example, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security; the Final Report of the Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security (held in Amman, Jordan in August 2015); and the report of the Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism (held in New York City in September 2015) (Sukarieh and Tannock, “The Global Securitization”).

The claim that the combination of the youth bulge and youth marginalisation

and exclusion is responsible for violence, unrest and instability in the Arab region needs to be questioned and critiqued for the negative and inaccurate stereotypes of youth that this claim tends to promote. As Anne Hendrixson notes:

The youth bulge is most often personified as an angry young brown man from Africa, the Middle East or parts of Asia or Latin America. He is often portrayed as Muslim, susceptible to extremism, and sometimes driven by his very biology to unrest. This stereotype is an example of what anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes calls “dangerous discourses” that over-predict individual acts of youth violence, even as they downplay the role of other forms of violence and structural inequalities that contribute to youth poverty and powerlessness. (2)

AHDR 2016 is more moderate in its portrayal of youth as being particularly susceptible to violence and disorder than some other youth bulge texts (for example, Cincotta and Doces, the age Structural Maturity Thesis): while “youth, especially young men ... are often depicted as especially prone to violence,” the report observes, “most young people do not engage in violence” (143). Nonetheless,

we can still find echoes of such negatively stereotyped language in the report. It is a combination of “less control over life, a greater space for self-expression and a lower prevalence of obedience to authority” that led Arab youth to spearhead the recent period of unrest that swept across the region, according to the report (59). These and other such claims of increased youth susceptibility to violence and conflict are widely challenged in the youth studies literature (e.g., Arnett; Offer and Schonert-Reichl).

But more than this, there is also a concerning historical revisionism at play here. First, there is the claim made throughout AHDR 2016 that the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 were youth-led events. This, of course, is how the Arab Spring has widely been portrayed right from the very beginning of the emergence of the first protests, as a “youth revolt,” “youth uprising” or “youth quake” (Al-Momani; Sadiki; Zill). This portrayal, however widespread it may have become, it also highly inaccurate. For while many young Arab men and women were absolutely central participants in the Arab Spring protests, there were multiple other groups and actors from across Arab civil society that were also directly involved with the uprising, including trade unions, peasant movements, poor people’s orga-

nizations, women’s groups, political parties and Islamist and faith-based movements (Dahi; Joya et al.; Korany; Soliman). By framing the Arab Spring as a youth phenomenon, we obscure the presence and leadership of these other groups, erase their concerns and agendas, and misconstrue the broader nature and significance of the uprising for the Arab region as a whole. Such a framing also helps to suggest a much narrower set of responses to the protests (e.g., promoting educational reforms, etc.) than might otherwise be expected.

Second, and even more alarming, is the blurring together in AHDR 2016 of both the Arab Spring uprisings and their often violent aftermath – a blurring together that effectively holds Arab youth responsible not just for the Arab Spring, but also for the counter-revolution and so-called Arab Winter that followed. For example, the opening pages of AHDR 2016 are framed by a direct link between Arab youth and the extensive regional instability and violence of the previous five years:

The report underlines that the wave of protests which has swept through a number of Arab countries with youth at the forefront has led to fundamental transformations across the entire regi-

on.... Systems which had maintained stability came under serious challenge, with protracted conflict ensuing. (5)

Similarly, AHDR 2016 closes with a parallel statement that again ties Arab youth to regional conflict and war:

This Report examines the problems and challenges of youth in light of the recent [Arab Spring] uprisings.... Since 2011, several countries in the region witnessed uprisings, and the region has experienced the most rapid expansion in war and violent conflict among all global regions over the past decade.... The exclusion of youth is pervasive throughout the Arab region ... [and] ignited uprisings across many Arab countries in late 2010 and early 2011, causing some to descend into social and political instability and deep economic uncertainty. (170)

This blaming of Arab youth for the protracted violence and unrest in the Arab region following the 2011 Arab Spring effectively leads to the complete erasure of the responsibility of other actors in Arab society for such violence—in particular, the forces of counter-revolution, includes the old regimes, political and business elites, neighboring and western states, and inter-

national organisations (Al-Rasheed; Kamrava; Nuweihed and Warren). Indeed, far from being key perpetrators of violence and conflict, youth in the Arab world, as elsewhere, are often much more likely to be some of the principal victims of violence being committed against them by ruling elites and their supporters (Sommers). All of this revisionism is an example of what might be called the “youth ruse” (Sukarieh and Tannock, “Youth Ruse”). In the guise of supporting and empowering youth, the embrace of the youth frame in documents such as AHDR 2016 is actually used to import a whole set of problematic analyses and responses that are prejudiced against and harmful to the young men and women that such a framing is ostensibly supposed to protect.

Shifting Concerns Around Arab Youth: From Deficit to Surfeit?

There is another framing in AHDR 2016 that marks a further shift from the previous series of Arab Human Development Reports. From the beginning of the AHDR series, the prevailing framework for portraying the Arab region, as noted earlier, has been a language of deficit, lack, lag and backwardness. AHDR 2016, as has already been pointed out, likewise promotes a stereotyped discourse of youth

deficits, problems and pathologies as presenting a major challenge for development in Arab countries. However, at the same time, there is also a counter-discourse in AHDR 2016 that argues that problems in the Arab region today are being caused not so much by deficits in Arab youth, but what we might term *surfeits* – an abundance or excess of skills, abilities, knowledge, insight, aspiration and ambition. First, Arab youth are repeatedly referred to in AHDR 2016 as the most highly educated generation in the history of the region. The report begins by stating that “today’s generation of young people [in the Arab world] are more educated, active and connected to the outside world, and hence have a greater awareness of their realities and higher aspirations for a better future” (8). Second, Arab youth are also repeatedly referred to in AHDR 2016 as being highly networked – both within the Arab region and externally with the rest of the world – active on social media and technologically savvy:

Through their access to information and communication technology, youth [in the Arab region] are increasingly connected to the world.... [T]his exposure to information and communication has been a liberating portal and a virtual space to express themselves,

raise objections, voice their opinions and challenge power structures, thus transforming them from passive members of society into active, self-aware and reform-driven individuals. (27)

Third, more generally, Arab youth are referred to as being highly aware and ambitious, as “the progress in some areas of human development over the years has tended to elevate the expectations of people in Arab countries” (24).

All of these shifts might be expected to be cause for celebration – particularly in the context of the long litany of complaints about Arab deficits and deficiencies throughout the rest of the AHDR series. Paradoxically, however, these apparent successes are instead presented in AHDR 2016 as a danger and threat to the Arab region as a whole, and a potential cause of social and political instability and unrest. The rise of the “most well-educated” generation in the Arab region’s history, AHDR 2016 warns, may “constitute a destabilizing force,” “an overwhelming power for destruction,” and a threat that is reshaping “the region’s security landscape” (8, 28, 170). The reason for this, according to AHDR 2016, is the tension and conflict between the high levels of education, knowledge and skill, aspiration and expect-

tation among Arab youth, on the one hand, and the sharply limited social, political and economic opportunities available to the majority of youth in most Arab countries, on the other. Thus, “young people’s awareness [in the Arab region] of their capabilities and rights collides with a reality that marginalizes them and blocks their pathways to express their opinions, actively participate or earn a living” (8). Because Arab youth “enjoy fewer opportunities than their parents to convert their skills into higher living standards,” and as a consequence, “possess so little hope of achieving tangible progress,” their education and ability becomes not a resource or benefit to the Arab world, but a danger and threat that needs to be channelled and contained (170).

What we are seeing here in AHDR 2016 are some of the first signs of cracks in the neo-liberal development model that has consistently promoted more education, information, skills and knowledge as the standard solution for both individual and societal development. In what Brown, Lauder, and Ashton refer to as the “broken promises of education, jobs and incomes,” formal institutions of education have been pressured to deliver universal opportunities for social and economic mobility in an environment where there are simply not

enough high quality, engaging and well remunerated jobs – or jobs of any kind, quite simply – to go around. This is not just happening in the Arab region, but globally, as the spectre of graduate unemployment and underemployment – and the threat of social, economic and political instability that the thwarted expectations and ambitions of highly educated and capable graduates presents – becomes a regular topic of discussion in political, media and public discourse (Guardian; Jeffrey et al.; Mason). Particularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, concerns about the problem of over-education and under-employment, previously seen during the early years of the rise of mass higher education in the 1960s, have once again returned (Bills; Green). Business and political leaders now talk not just of needing to raise the aspirations of young people, but of having to tackle the sense of *entitlement* among the young, and of *managing* and even *lowering* their expectations (Sukarieh and Tannock, *Youth Rising* 69-70). As Drine writes of the Arab region, one of the central development problems currently is that there is a “mismatch between what the labour market offers, and what young people expect.” Part of the response to this situation is to argue that even though Arab youth are highly educated and skilled, they have the

wrong kinds of education and skills, and thus education and training needs to be tied more closely to the needs and interests of employers – as discussed above. But the fact that it is now the high levels of education, technological integration and ambition that are being constituting a key youth challenge raises one of the most important questions for the Arab region, and indeed the global South, over the coming decade. How will these be addressed effectively? What lasting significance will this shift from a concern with youth deficits to claims about youth surfeits have for the Arab region and beyond?

Conclusion

The past decade has seen the rise of different discourses around youth in the Arab world, from the war on terror and discourse of Arab youth as terrorists, to the Arab Spring and construction of Arab youth as freedom fighters and revolutionaries, to the current period, where Arab youth are once again seen as a dangerous threat, liable to plunge countries into extended periods of instability, conflict and crisis. What is constant in all these different constructions of Arab youth over the past decade is the fact that youth has been a trope through which elite agendas, anxieties, concerns and interests are projected. In this sense, AHDR 2016 is part

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of a larger pattern that views youth, whether positively or negatively, both as a threat to the contemporary social and economic order in the region, and also as a useful rhetorical frame to call for reinforcements of this prevailing social and economic order. What this article argues is that, if we are break out of this pattern, we need to develop much greater critical reflection about the particular ways in which the youth frame is mobilized in policy and development discourse in the Arab region, and more generally, across the world. The promise of more critical, political economy based studies of youth is that not only will we be able to develop a better, more grounded understanding of the current situation of youth in the Arab region, but we might also be better able to push for new, creative and alternative development policies and programs that will benefit not just Arab youth, but individuals of all age groups in the Arab world as well.

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