

# The Arab Spring and Youth

## *In Mid-air, Heaven Above Us and Hell Beneath*

In a literal sense, the Arab Spring began on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2010 at Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, when a young man called Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to himself, driven to despair by the humiliation, denigration, bullying and casual cruelty – what is called *hogra* - of the local authorities.

Just as significant, though, is the reason *why* Mohamed Bouazizi was pushing his barrow round the streets of his fly-blown town, selling vegetables bought on credit for tiny profits. He had no job, because there weren't any jobs in Sidi Bouzid. Having left high school himself without graduating, he sold vegetables in order to give his five younger brothers and sisters the chance to stay in school. His sister Samira told *al-Jazeera* that "My sister was the one in university and he would pay for her, and I am still a student and he would spend money on me." Another sister, Basma, said, "His dream was to see his sisters go to university."

In this way Mohamed Bouazizi epitomizes not just the chain of events he was unfortunate enough to spark off, but the huge earthquake of pent-up aspiration, frustration and despair that many of the young people of the region felt, and feel, rumbling beneath their feet. He knew that the future for his family lay in education; and he didn't see any difference between the proper expectations of boys and girls. There is nobility not just obliquely in his self-sacrifice, but directly in his determination that his family should prosper through education.

Bouazizi stands for the revolutions themselves but also for the demographic, social and political movements that led to them. In addressing today *The Arab Spring and the Young*, I'm talking about two halves of a single whole: the Arab Spring was the work of the young, the outcome of their frustration. The future – the Summer, if you like – is inexorably theirs. What I shall try to do this morning is to sketch out a little of my own, no doubt rather naïve, thinking on this linkage. I'll talk a little about demography and social media; I'll touch on education and employment; and I'll finish with some more general thoughts on the global significance of what has happened over the last two years, and is still happening today, in the MENA region. Because I think that the Arab Spring may well be the first cuckoo of a much wider season of discontent and change which will affect the world, perhaps to its ultimate benefit.

I actually detest the phrase 'Arab Spring.' It is one of those glib labels that western commentators attach to events that they want to pigeon-hole, trying to connect it to a string of other labels that *imply* explanation without actually explaining anything. Revolutions are bleached of originality with labels like Orange, Velvet, Jasmine, Rose, Green, Tulip and Cedar; and anything subversive that happens in the first half of the year is a

Spring, whether in Prague or Tunis. In reality Mohamed Bouazizi died in the dead of winter, and the great events of Tunis and Cairo took place before the first buds of spring. And as all of us who live in North Africa know, 'Arab' is at best a contentiously monolithic description of its people.

What happened deserves a better name. The 'Arab Spring' is the opening move in a gymnastic floor-routine, the cartwheel-with-a-twist which brings the gymnast onto the mat for his lightning-fast chain of somersaults, turns, springs and handstands. This is quite appropriate but not, I think, what is intended by the phrase when used by journalists. Tariq Ramadan calls the events of 2011 *The Arab Awakening*. Marc Lynch calls it *The Arab Uprising*: its real name will be given it when its consequences are clearer.

The one thing we can say for certain is that it was, and is, a movement that springs from youth. This is obvious as soon as you look at the demography of the region. How could it be anything else in a region where the median age of the population ranges from 17.8 years in Yemen to the giddy heights of 29.1 years in Tunisia? Put another way, 32.1% of Egypt's population in 2010 was under 15 years old, as was 22.9% of Tunisia's, 30.1% of Libya's (and, by the way, 28% of Morocco's). The population of MENA has increased 3.7 times since 1950, and will increase another 1.9 times by 2050, the highest growth rates in the world. The region has the highest dependency ratios in the world – the ratio of people supported to people supporting them: the ratio, that is, in which Bouazizi stood on one side of the colon and his sisters on the other. And it has a desperate shortage of jobs: 24% of the labour force aged 15-24 in North Africa is unemployed. Egypt alone would need to create 500,000 new jobs a year to accommodate the young people coming into its job market. It would be astonishing if the pressure from youth unemployment had *not* been a motor for discontent. In Egypt, 80% of the unemployed were under 30 in 2006, for Jordan that figure was 75% in 2007.<sup>1</sup> That is a big motor.

In 2010 the region's rulers were isolated old men in shoulder-boards, grimly hanging on to power since well before the vast majority of their subjects were born. Hosni Mubarak was born in 1928, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 1936, Muammar Gaddafi in 1942; and their sidekicks were little fresher: when, in a bid to inject new blood into his imploding regime in late January 2011, Mubarak appointed a vice-president, he chose the 75-year old general Omar Sulaiman. It is interesting to compare the age of the region's rulers with the median age of their population: by 2011 Mubarak was as old as any 3.4 Egyptians, Ben Ali equated to 2.5 Tunisians, and Gaddafi tipped the scale with 2.6 Libyans. By way of comparison, in Europe, the Prime Ministers of Great Britain, France and Spain, score a slightly lower 1.1, 1.5 and 1.4. This isn't just because the European leaders are younger: it's primarily because the populations of European countries are older, and ageing progressively. In 2003 the median age in the EC was 30.7: by 2050 it will be, according to Brookings Institute estimates, around 50.2.

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<sup>1</sup> Brookings Institute, Population Reference Bureau

All this is not to say that age and wisdom don't go together (though little in the performance of the three Arab presidents suggests a very high correlation). What I *am* suggesting, though, is simply that in a region where the population is growing younger and younger, the tenacious grip of old men on power has helped alienate the young. After a half century of authoritarian rule scarcely refreshed even by generational change (Mubarak was, after all, a young contemporary of Nasser and Sadat,) not just one new generation, but perhaps three new generations, each bigger and unhappier than the one before, demanded change at once.

Observers had commented over the previous decade on the development of what the American writer Marc Lynch called 'the new Arab public space,' or 'the new Arab street.' Built on the foundations of satellite television and, increasingly, the internet, it was a new and intoxicating dimension for discussion, a liberation from the heavy-handed control of information, news, comment, speech and intellectual life that characterized the previous half century of post-colonial military rule. Its steady growth in the last decade has been a case of demand and means feeding each other in a creative spiral.

It has often been said that the social media in general, and Facebook in particular, made the revolutions possible, but this is only a partial truth. What happened between 1996 and 2011 was the development in this new public space of a common public opinion, a shared spectrum of possibility, a concern with overlapping, if not identical, issues across the Arabic-speaking world. This was achieved first of all by *al-Jazeera*, founded in 1996, for that first part of its life a raucous, independent aggregator of opinion and discussion that reached every TV-set in the region and beyond, building a common language of politics and debate. It encouraged an evaporation of the automatic respect demanded by, and grudgingly given to, the Arab autocrats. Mobile telephony supported it, and then came Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These widened the space, made it easier to use and – crucially – appealed predominantly to young people in a way that *al-Jazeera* hadn't: the social media were, and remain, largely the domain of the young.

It's certainly true, as is so often said, that the ability to co-ordinate and plan political demonstrations and actions was hugely enhanced by the social media (though Wael Ghonem, the Egyptian social media wizard, emphasizes too the crucial role of the mobile phone). But important as it was, what strikes me more strongly is the internationalization that underlay it. When, in the first days of the Tunisian revolution, the government shut down websites, they were seamlessly picked up by Egyptian activists, who kept Facebook running uninterrupted in Tunisia during those crucial early days with mirror sites and other magic; and Egyptian Twitter-feeds rebroadcast key hashtags to Tunisian demonstrations.<sup>2</sup> This reflects too the way the agendas were shared: in the late winter and early spring of 2011 we watched events in one country instantly picked up in another, imitated, applauded, supported, criticized.

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<sup>2</sup> Elliott Colla, *The People Want*, in MERIP 263 (Summer 2012)

But for our purposes today, we need to note the age profile of users of Facebook. North Africa is an intense user, with Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia ranking first, second, third and fourth in the Arabic-speaking world in raw numbers (21<sup>st</sup>, 35<sup>th</sup>, 42<sup>nd</sup> and 48<sup>th</sup> in the world). Of their users, the vast majority are under 24, which we can think of approximately as being of 'educational age:' 61% in Egypt and Algeria, about 60% in Tunisia, 52% in Libya. By way of contrast, users aged between 65 and 100 are about 1% . It seems unlikely that Mubarak and Ben Ali had Facebook pages to poke.<sup>3</sup>

I offer this not as an explanation but as background. The population of the region is very young in absolute terms – one third of MENA's population is under 15, and another fifth is aged between 15 and 24 – and very young relative to its former governors. It is also unprecedentedly well-networked, with an effective 'new Arab public space' stretching virtually across national boundaries, largely defying censorship. Into this public space emerge questions, debates and causes that have long been kept under control or excluded completely from the state media – Islamism, Palestine, Iraq, women, political change, jobs, citizenship, human rights, social reform. And all this impinges heavily on the question of education.

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There is a crisis in education in the MENA region. It is impossible to deny that this crisis exists: it would be pretty amazing, given the figures I've just quoted, if it didn't. It is a set of highly complex and demanding interlocking challenges, of variables which seem always to operate against each other to make solutions obstinately elusive. Education is in flux in many parts of the world, beset by problems of numbers, of cost, of quality, of employment and of purpose. In Britain, after dramatic growth in the last 40 years, we have achieved some sort of equilibrium. We have found, for the time being at least, solutions that work, if not in the way that everyone might wish. In southern Europe problems are more intractable, with much in common around the Mediterranean shore. Little happening on the university campuses of Cairo and Tunis would be *entirely* unfamiliar on many campuses in southern Europe.

Education is of course always a ladder , a means of social betterment, and this is particularly true of public education, public universities, in countries once they have shed their colonial yoke. Generally speaking, education in colonial times was not designed to *integrate* the coloniser and the colonized; and even where it was, the doors were more often than not pushed close in the twentieth century. Most frequently it was designed to keep them apart, subtly or crudely, and to hedge about a monopoly of higher positions of power for Europeans and, at best, a small 'native' elite. This tendency was particularly marked in French North Africa.

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers from [www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/](http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/) - Tunisia's numbers are not annotated and the percentages are my reading of the pie-chart; and Morocco's consolidate several age-bands broken down more finely in other cases.

Independence brought a hugely increased demand for education at all levels, as parents rushed to seek for their children the benefits that an elite education could visibly bring. At first, education systems opened up, and a real democratization of education followed. The early decades of independence, from Egypt to Morocco, saw a flowering of opportunity and mobility. But higher education still remained a very selective business, and while the determined and intelligent poor could gain education, and public funding for it, their numbers remained relatively small.

As numbers swelled, they placed a growing strain on resources in at least two respects. Firstly, the raw cost of education grew; and secondly, the threat to the position of post-colonial elites became uncomfortable. Numbers increased dramatically, and resources did not, could not, keep up with them. Quality declined. Many of those who could afford the cost joined those who already used private education to underwrite their children's success. Private institutions and study abroad took both the richer students and many of the more aspiring teachers and researchers out of the public system. State security became more concerned as the years went by with students' potential for unrest and political agitation, leading in many countries to a tighter and tighter grip on university campuses and syllabuses, and the progressive departure of more of the best teachers and researchers.

This is of course not to deny the idealism of many who worked and work in public education. But they were faced with an intractable problem. The public system had been seen since colonial times as a route into public sector employment, and for many years it continued to deliver the *muazzifeen* that the relatively unsophisticated administrations required. The implicit bargain that graduates would be employed by the public sector sustained university recruitment, and the widespread employment by the government of graduates and non-graduates in low-wage but secure jobs helped control unemployment. But the bargain was not stable: public administrations became more sophisticated in their requirements; standards of education generally fell, perhaps particularly in the humanities and social sciences that are much the cheapest way of accommodating expanding numbers, accounting for 54% of all students in the MENA region in 2008/9.<sup>4</sup>

The result is a growing supply of graduates to a market that cannot now absorb them. There are simply too many – and their skills do not match the needs of the market, whether in the private or the public sector. In Tunisia 22% of unemployed adults have a tertiary degree; in Egypt 25%; in Morocco 18% (all this against an OECD average of 3.3%). Disproportionately, they want employment in the public sector, valuing job-security and deprecating risk. All too often this circle is squared by using the public sector job as a basis for more lucrative private sector work – a phenomenon highlighted in Morocco recently by the Ministers of both Education and Health.

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<sup>4</sup> *Breaking Even or Breaking Through*, World Bank, 2011

This level of aspiration is hard to satisfy. In my adult lifetime student enrollment in Britain has gone from just over 10% to just under 45% of each year group, fundamentally changing Higher Education in Britain – we have, to use that wonderfully expressive French term, undergone *massification*. The British state, which could afford to educate an élite of 10%, can't afford to educate a much less selectively chosen cohort of 45%. This has entailed radical changes to university and student funding, a much leaner and cheaper (as far as the state is concerned) offering reinforced by rigorous Quality Assurance. If northern European countries like Britain cannot *massify* their systems without radical change, particularly to funding, it seems likely that North African countries will find it considerably more difficult, especially those like Egypt and Tunisia where low per capita GDP and a rising demographic trends coincide. And of course at the same time, in the North, public sectors are shrinking: Britain alone has shed some 65,000 civil service jobs since the last election in 2010.

In Morocco, the present Head of Government, Abdelilah Benkirane has taken this bull by the horns, and made it clear that there can be no wholesale absorption of unemployed graduates into the public sector workforce. Promises by his predecessor to do so were in his view impossible and irresponsible. And so in Morocco we have currently a stand-off which represents the quintessence of the problem: “unemployed graduate joint committees want[ing] only one solution – non-competitive entry into the civil service;”<sup>5</sup> and a government which finally has the courage to admit that the country cannot support a public sector which is staffed not according to any assessment of its HR needs or its mission, but simply as a bottomless pit of unconditional life-support for the output of the HE sector.

This makes clear sense: it cannot be right to take large numbers of unqualified people into a public sector that is already too big, simply to pacify them. In fact it can't even be possible. Yet it is a heart-breaking impasse, that sees young men and women lulled by the serial weakness of government after government across the region, to assume such an irresponsible bargain – and then to be faced with the harsh reality.

I'll add here, because we are sitting in a Moroccan university, that Morocco is ahead of the pack when it comes to addressing this problem. World Bank figures show that while increasing its output of graduates (from 4.8% to 6% of the adult population in the decade 2000-2010), it has nonetheless managed to reduce the proportion of the adult unemployed who hold a degree, from 28.4% to 17.8% over the same period). By contrast, in Tunisia the figure has *risen* from 8.7% to 21.9%; and in Egypt it has fallen slightly, but only to 24.8%. Earlier this week the British Council ran a two-day seminar in Tangier on graduate employability, and one of our British participants said to me at the end, “I am really very impressed: the quality of thinking and debate on this subject in Morocco is streets ahead of any other country in the region where I have worked, and much more challenging.”

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.magharebia.com>, 17.5.2012

Nonetheless, the OECD average for graduates as a proportion of adult population in 2010 was 14.5% - and graduates made up 3.3% of the unemployed, meaning that a degree very significantly increases employability and reduces chances of unemployment. Beside this, it isn't clear that having a degree is advantageous in the search for employment the MENA region: indeed, in most MENA countries a degree seems to lead to a reduced likelihood of finding a job.

What must be, and will be, advantageous is the appetite for risk, the valuing of opportunity over certainty, of job-creation over job-consumption. For this, very different skills are necessary – and to this essentially non-traditional skill-set universities are beginning seriously to turn their attention.

Across the region, it is in this closing down of possibilities that the roots of the last two years' upheavals lie: the sense that there was no future, that expectations of paid work, however artificial that work might be, were evaporating before their eyes. That their education – for which the Bouazizis of this world had broken their backs, had been for nothing. And that their aged rulers didn't give a damn.

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So in early 2011 predominantly young people took to the streets across North Africa, in an exhilarating season of optimism and innovation. As Wordsworth wrote of the French Revolution,

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven! - Oh! times,  
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways  
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once  
The attraction of a country in romance!

And this was very much the sense of Tahrir Square and the countless other sites of demonstration hyperlinked into it across the region. Expectations were huge, and they were to a large extent fulfilled, in the short term at least. Above all, these were revolutions of the young – “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very heaven.”

I'm not going to dwell on the history (though I shall return to the culture) except to say that the heady days of any revolution pass quickly. Other social forces, better organized, exploit the new possibilities and appear to sideline the young. Economic 'realities' resume service. Older interests – the Deep State - re-emerge in new clothes, trying to reassert themselves. All this of course delights the pessimists in the western commentariat who are ever ready to cry out in dismay that a liberal revolution has been hijacked by Islamists, or recaptured by the thugs of the *ancien regime*.

But as well as old economic realities rearing their heads, there are new realities to deal with too. Young Arabs and Amazigh won't simply go – and haven't gone - home to carry on as before: the world has changed. The figures that I quote a few minutes ago show very clearly that North Africa is young, and the flattening out of this 'youthification,' the moment when demographic transition levels out the growth curve, is still a good many years in the future.

The challenge of the next decades is to build a society for the region's young people, of whom there are going to be more with every passing year, for some time to come. That means that education and employment, and the direct link between what is taught and what the labour market needs, is absolutely crucial. Young men and women want to take control of their lives. They want to earn a decent wage and send their children to decent schools and universities, as of right, and they will not stop demanding. Here in Morocco, where demonstrations have been for the most part gentler and at times more deferential affairs, I remember very well one week last year when a call went out from the February 20<sup>th</sup> Movement that all the following Sunday's demonstrators were to carry a book as a symbol of the centrality of learning. *Touché*.

And it is not that governments are not trying. As the World Bank makes quite clear,<sup>6</sup> MENA countries are spending a higher percentage of GDP on education than OECD countries; but it still represents an inadequate expenditure to do what needs to be done. Ingenuity is required in redesigning syllabuses, job-market skills, Quality Assurance, and funding mechanisms. The Ministry of Higher Education here in Morocco has recently had the courage to raise, albeit tentatively, the question of means-tested university fees, and this is a discussion that will have to continue across the region. The enhanced democratic mandates of governments in post 'Arab Spring' countries should enable them to tackle really difficult questions like this with radicalism.

But one way or another, education must get better – and better – at preparing the young for a constantly changing job-market, if the same frustrations are not simply to build up again to intolerable levels. This is a human, a social and a political imperative. Education, as so often, is the key to our future.

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I want to conclude by looking at the 'Arab Spring' from a different angle. Wordsworth was an internationalist, as a young man inspired by the passion and the idealism of events in Paris in 1789. And the events of North Africa in 2011-12 have had strong international repercussions at an ethical as well as a political level. It is remarkable how powerful these have been. In a Europe itself depressed by economic crisis and austerity, the uprisings of last year have been hugely symbolic. I have watched signs, large and small, of the way the

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<sup>6</sup> *Breaking Even or Breaking Through*, World Bank, 2011

ethical seeds scattered along this African coast have blown northwards, quite apart from the rash of Tahrir Squares in Europe's public places. Let me mention just three of them.

When young people in London occupied the churchyard of St Paul's cathedral in London, as part of the Occupy movement against exploitative capitalism and the distribution of pain under the government's austerity measures, the sign they hoisted onto the wall read 'Tahrir Square, London EC4.'

When demonstrators occupied the State Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, protesting against union-busting laws passed by a right-wing state government, the crowd chanted "Fight like Egyptians," and the Egyptian crowds in Tahrir Square e-mailed pizza-orders to a Wisconsin pizzeria, to be delivered to their fellow demonstrators in the US.

Finally (and I have chosen only three of many) I remember watching in amazement on YouTube as a young American crowd marched down Wall Street chanting "Ash-sha'b yurid isqat Wall Street" – 'the people want the fall of Wall Street,' just as their young Arab contemporaries had chanted "*Ash-sha'b yurid isqat al-Nizam*," and countless other variations. It wasn't just that a cultural meme was escaping from Egypt and embedding itself firmly in countries that have not in the past taken much notice of North Africa, or indeed the entire MENA region, other than as a problem. More than that, as I came later to understand, this meme had a longer trajectory from its birth in a widely known 1933 poem by the Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, through successive incarnations in Tunisian anthems, via adaptation to the urgent traditional pan-Arab crowd-chanting rhythm of "*Bil-ruh, bil-damm, nafdik ya Fulan*" ... all the way to Wall Street. The currents that swirl about the MENA region are sloshing outwards at last.<sup>7</sup>

What is going on here, I think and hope, is the beginning of the reinsertion of the Maghreb and North Africa, and perhaps too the wider Arab world, into their proper, ancient geo-cultural matrix. For much of the early modern period, despite familiarity and trade in goods and sometimes ideas too, the two shores of the Mediterranean have glowered sullenly at each Other. Today, after an era of colonialism, decades of migration northwards and an attitude in Europe which did not give great respect to the *deeper* culture of the south, the wind has changed. Young people in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere in the MENA region are seen as exemplars: European university students travelled south to experience their moment of Wordsworthian bliss, and while we may smile indulgently, it does genuinely thrill me to see young English men and women looking to young Arabs and Amazighs for inspiration.

This, to go back to the top, is about shared experience in a shared public sphere. What has been happening in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and elsewhere has been on

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<sup>7</sup> Elliott Colla, *The People Want*, in MERIP 263 (Summer 2012)

You-Tube and Facebook, often in English and French. Film clips and appeals for help have made the events of 2011-12 part of every European student's common vocabulary and concern. As Europe has descended into grey austerity, with idealism getting pretty thin on the ground, idealism has in part been outsourced.

This has happened at a time when shared concerns too have been converging. We need only look at the streets of Athens to see what happens to a society that has its social supports removed, its education and its job-market hollowed out, with the young the disproportionate victims. Greece is not alone in this. Spain has a higher rate of youth unemployment than Morocco. Across Europe and the world in 2011 Occupy movements took over public squares in imitation of Tahrir, with young demonstrators demanding change. Like their cousins in Tunis and Cairo, and like my splendid Libyan colleague who spent the revolution in his country teaching English to insurgents in the Jebel Akhdar, they are looking to a rather different future. The pressure is great.

Two weeks ago, I was in London and went to the theatre to see Howard Brenton's new play, *55 Days*, which is about the period after England's second civil war in 1648, when Oliver Cromwell and his army colleagues were just beginning to contemplate a republic. I was greatly struck by a comment that Cromwell made, not as it reflected on his own dilemmas in that winter of 1648, but as a lovely summary of where we are all today, north and south of the Mediterranean, particularly in those countries like Egypt, Libya and Tunisia where governments have fallen and nations are being rebuilt:

"We are inventing a country." Cromwell says, "We are in an unknown region, floating on nothing, trying to think thoughts never thought before. We are in mid-air, Heaven above us, Hell beneath."

Those "thoughts never thought before" are what the young and the Arab Spring bring so creatively together.

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