

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

Economic Security and the Hopes of Arab Youth ^[1]

Although democracy retains its allure, the Arab uprisings that began last year were about democracy primarily as simply a means to an end.

The real goal of those who took to the streets was to grasp a better future for themselves and their families. Having a job, getting enough to eat, being assured that children could receive decent education and medical care – these constitute the substance of everyday life that so many in the Arab world had long been denied and were determined to claim.

As the political transition within Arab states continues, young people in that region are looking ahead toward an unsettled future. A survey of 18 to 24-year-olds in 12 Arab countries conducted by ASDA's Burson-Marsteller found that “living in a democratic country,” which was the top aspiration in last year's survey now ranks third, behind “being paid a fair wage” and “owning my own home.” Respondents cited the high cost of living as their biggest concern, and said that civil unrest and lack of democracy are the biggest obstacles facing the region.

Social unrest and economic challenges are closely related, particularly in terms of the flow of foreign capital into the region. During 2008, foreign direct investment into Arab countries totaled US\$92 billion; in 2012, the figure is expected to be US\$29 billion. As part of their public diplomacy efforts, the United States and other countries have encouraged entrepreneurship, particularly among young Arabs, but additional incentives need to be offered to private sector investors to help keep Arab economies from slipping into chaos. If greater economic disarray occurs, political turmoil will follow, and the only beneficiaries will be extremist groups skilled in taking advantage of frustration and fear.

Despite the dark clouds that are gathering, the survey found that the “Arab spring” is regarded as a positive development, and that it has stimulated belief among a solid majority of respondents that their countries are now moving in the right direction. Political opinions such as this one are influenced by a surge in news consumption by young Arabs. To the question, “How often do you update yourself on news and current affairs?” the response “Daily” rose from 18 percent in early 2011 to 52 percent this year. Reliance on television news has dropped markedly, while use of online news sources has climbed significantly.

Pulling together these survey results helps define a general portrait of Arab youth. They retain considerable optimism about their countries' political futures in the aftermath of the dramatic events of 2011. But as they look at their own lives, they perceive – quite rightly – that they will face enormous challenges. Their increased attentiveness to news might exacerbate their impatience as they become better informed about how people live in the rest of the Arab world and beyond.

All this is useful information for the United States and other countries engaged in public diplomacy toward Arab populations. Public diplomacy involves long-term strategies, and the mix of hopes and concerns so clearly reflected in the responses to the Arab youth survey should be integrated into the planning of public diplomacy programs directed at this part of the world.
