
The future rises in the Middle East

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This article was originally released on February 28, 2011 as a response to events then unfolding on the ground across the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the learnings contained in this piece can help to inform our understanding of the continued instability across the region. The authors take sole responsibility for the views contained in this article.

Everyone's been talking about 'Revolution 2.0' across the Middle East. The so-called digital revolution has attracted at least as much attention as the political volcanoes themselves as they've erupted – first in Tunisia, then Egypt, spilling over into Libya and now simmering at various levels of discontent as far and wide as Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Oman, Iraq and even Saudi Arabia. Online social networking, content-sharing platforms, and satellite news channels have certainly been massive enablers of the regional uprising we've seen unfold in recent weeks. But the truth is that this has been first and foremost a people's revolution, and a young people's revolution at that. The digital tools that have enabled and continue to progress their causes are just that, tools. Yes, it's true that the January 25th Revolution in Cairo spread from a single Facebook page, and that Twitter alone allows activists the crucial real-time citizen-journalism that spurs real-time action. But the danger in over-crediting the media and under-crediting the message is that we dilute the fearless passion it has taken for these young people to stand up for their civic rights in the face of often blank autocratic oppression. As with all historically successful revolutions, it's the people, and not the tools, that really drive the change. And in a region where the people have been voiceless for so long, the world needs to take the time to understand them better.

In mid-2010, Ogilvy Noor, the arm of the advertising group Ogilvy & Mather that offers specialist advice on the global Muslim consumer population, undertook a large piece of multi-country research aiming to explore the lives of Muslims around the world – primarily focusing on their habits as consumers, but simultaneously uncovering their views on faith, family, society and much more. This piece of research gave us invaluable insight into how global Muslim youth are feeling, and what the beliefs and dreams are that guide them today. Given that all the countries facing political turmoil today are all at least 80% (most over 95%) Muslim, our data gives us a valuable steer on what is happening. It's well-known that Muslim countries are demographically younger – in the Middle East and North Africa region in particular, most countries are either peaking or reaching the peak of their 'youth bulges' (UN estimates have two thirds of the region's population as being under 25). Our study focused on the younger generation that we called the 'new Muslim consumer', who, we found, embody a mind-set quite irreconcilably different from generations before them, giving us a valuable lens through which to read what's happening on the ground today.

A different breed

We call them the Futurists. In our segmentation of the global Muslim consumer population, their values and behaviour emerged in stark contrast to the group who formed the more mainstream core of Muslim consumer behaviour – whom we called the Traditionalists. And while it's not fair to say that all young Muslims have Futurist tendencies, the Futurists

are much younger overall, tending to be under 30. And although they formed a slightly smaller proportion of our overall segmentation (40% compared with 60% of Traditionalists) their influence is undoubtedly stronger. In our consumer segmentation, the Futurists are formed of three sub-segments we called the Synthesisers, the Identifiers and the Movers – whose names alone point to how their values have the power to not only shape public opinion but to get the world to sit up and listen. While the leaderships of various Arab states in current turmoil came to power under the support of the Traditionalists (and indeed before many of today’s protesters were even born), the opposition they face today seem at heart to be Futurists. These leaders have never before had to have the kinds of conversations they must have with the Futurists. Understanding what they stand for can therefore help us better understand the implications of what’s happening today – especially since the power to shape the future lies in their hands.

A new mind-set

So what do the Futurists believe? Well, first and foremost, in themselves. Many have come of age in the shadow of 9/11, which has given them a strong sense of identity as Muslims – almost 70% of them said that they were extremely ‘proud to be Muslim’ and they were almost twice as likely as Traditionalists to say that ‘religion gave them a sense of identity’. This marks them out too from the global ‘Millennial’ or ‘Gen Y’ populations – a recent Arab Youth Survey by ASDA’s Burson-Marsteller found that 68% of MENA youth would say their religion defines them, compared with just 16% of youth in the West. But their coming of age in the global spotlight has also forced them to articulate what they believe in, outside of their faith, and what values form them as young adults. While Traditionalists, who tend to be older, fall along the more collectivist, affiliative end of the scale, seeking belonging and social harmony, the Futurists are more individualistic, more self-aware and much more assertive. They are the better-educated beneficiaries of decades of globalisation; technologically, intellectually and culturally more connected to a wider world than the Traditionalists. And yet, despite their seemingly boundless reserves of self-belief, they aren’t all faced with the better opportunities they expected. Unemployment in Egypt is, for example, ten times higher for college graduates than for elementary school leavers. According to the UNDP, the region’s economies will need to create a staggering 51 million jobs by 2020 to meet the combined demand of the millions unemployed today and those entering the workforce. These harsh realities come as a crushing blow to the Futurists of the region, 65% of whom said that they wished they had ‘the opportunity to contribute to the development of [their] country’.

We found that, compared with the need for ‘safety’ and ‘belonging’ among the Traditionalists, the success-driven Futurists are five times more likely to want to be ‘progressive’ than ‘harmonious’. They’re ambitious, and not afraid of working hard, and have a vision of success in which their faith and progress are inseparable – in fact, they’re twice as likely as Traditionalists to feel that Islam ‘gives life purpose and direction’. But, mirroring their political affinities, some of the facets of Islam they’re most drawn to are its focus on equality, fairness and compassion towards fellow Muslims. They believe in a progressive, flexible Islam, and so while religious sermons usually code any kind of anti-authoritarian uprising as being (Western-inspired) ‘uprisings against Islam’, this generation of Futurists in the region

rejects that simple dichotomy. They care about their faith just as much as they care about their civic, political and human rights, and this is their own brave home-grown, revolution.

They also ask more questions. Where the Traditionalists would balk at upsetting or challenging the status quo by probing sensitive issues, the Futurists strongly believe in their right to improve upon it.

They're not afraid to challenge, believing not only in the right to ask questions openly but also to receive honest, transparent answers. Our research reveals that they're twice as likely as Traditionalists to believe that it's 'important not to follow blindly'. Whether they demand to know where profits from global corporations are invested or ingredients are sourced, or whether they demand to know why they cannot get jobs without high-level connections, their actions stem from the same thirst for information, transparency and accountability.

So the Futurists are fearless drivers of change, unafraid to stand out and be vocal in their beliefs. They don't believe in letting their dreams die unrealised, or their demands go unheard. But we must not mistake them for iconoclastic anarchists. On the contrary, the world praised the largely peaceful Egyptian revolution and credited the maturity of its youthful protesters. Islam's emphasis on respect for authority persists for the Futurists; they simply want it to evolve so that authority is not solely top-down anymore. It must make room for equal dialogue. They believe in change, but they pursue it with dignity and don't believe in violence. As Rasha Hefza, founder of Mowata, an organisation in Saudi Arabia dedicated to using the internet to promote a civil society, says, 'we don't want people to go to jail – we just want a positive dialogue'.

A new leadership

This craving for dialogue points to their strongest belief of all – their respect for equality. Their worldview is fundamentally meritocratic, backed by their faith in Islam's principles of equal brotherhood. In our research we found Futurists to be twice as likely as Traditionalists to 'question barriers to achievement'. Unsurprisingly, this is where in the Middle East today they are clashing most strongly with the views of their leaders – and the corruption, nepotism and oppressive secrecy those leaders are responsible for. Many have commented on how there was no figurehead, no organised leadership apparent at Cairo's Tahrir Square protests. Groups of activists camped for days and broke into spontaneous chants. Voluntary work groups formed themselves into cleaning and administrative teams. And front and centre amidst all the activity were the bloggers' tents, filled with young activists frantically tweeting and updating the news that the rest of the country and the world were so hungry to hear. All voices were equal, and all had a say. The protests embodied a new definition of leadership that is more consultative and open, self-created out of the flatter world they live in. This doesn't just make them anti-authoritarian (at least when it comes to the kind of authority they're used to), it poses a new definition of leadership, founded on a democratic vision, that stands in clear opposition to the dictatorships they have grown up in the shadow of.

With all these new beliefs, it is hardly surprising that the Arab world's autocratic leaders and their Futurist-leaning opposition have difficulty seeing eye to eye. All over the Middle East, Futurist protesters are fighting passionately for more equal opportunities, more

transparency and more power for their people. They want basic human dignity and rights to be respected and preserved for all, not just for the cronies closest to those in power. Ambitious and hopeful, in every country they are fighting the same enemies because they dream the same dreams. As Fouad Al Farhan, a prominent Saudi blogger put it last week, ‘everywhere, Arab youth are fighting for freedom. They are scared of three things – terrorism, unemployment and corruption – because these three things darken their future’. The Futurist mentality means that they thrive on connected social encouragement – each group that succeeds spurs on others in the region. Dr Omar Ashour, Middle East analyst for the BBC, claims it is the ‘dedication and maturity of the Tunisian and Egyptian youth [that have] become inspirational models for other Arabs claiming their freedom and dignity back from the ruling dictators’. Bahraini activists tweeted their support for ‘the ongoing struggle of our Libyan brethren’ and prominent Saudi blogger Eman Al Nafjan agrees that it was the Egyptians ‘who made us realise that we can do it, too’. As the upheavals spill from country to country, drawing in young and old, men and women, academics and labourers, of all classes and political strands, we are witnessing what amounts to a broad-based pan-regional uprising with Futurist beliefs – of equality, respect, pluralism and leadership through dialogue – at its core.

A new language

The tragedy is that their voices are not being heard and understood on their own terms. Time and again, leaders of the Arab world have proven themselves disconnected and unable to respond appropriately to an opposition they don’t really understand. When Hosni Mubarak’s piecemeal concessions eventually culminated in his muddled speech of refusal to step down, Cairo’s protestors were overcome with furious disbelief at his out-dated paternalistic tone and his continued resistance. When Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah offered a hasty \$37bn in benefits to citizens at the threat of a Day of Rage from young Saudi protesters, the angry and immediate response on Twitter was ‘We want rights, not gifts!’. To the Futurist protesters, success isn’t just about money; their goals today are focused on all the civil liberties they’ve never had. Out-of-touch leaders seem consistently to deliver too little too late, demonstrating a fundamental lack of empathy with where their opposition is coming from. They’re using an outmoded language (political appointments, financial gifts) aimed at silencing, exactly when their new audience are craving real dialogue. Sheikh Salman Al Auda, a prominent progressive in Saudi Arabia, has called the whole uprising ‘a sign that that ageing governments all over the region are incapable of communicating with the younger generation’.

For now, the problem is as much one of misunderstanding and lack of empathy as it is one of poor communication between the leaders and their people. The Futurists hold the power to shape their nations’ futures in their hands – of that there’s no doubt. They see themselves at the centre of their countries’ histories as they are being written. What they do and believe will have effects more far-reaching than just in the region. Much more can be got out of collaborating with them than opposing them. Detaining bloggers, hacking and deleting activists’ Facebook accounts, and mysteriously blocking communications channels, as regimes from Tunisia to Libya have done in recent weeks, will only serve to further cement the wall of miscommunication between the two sides. The digital tools are ones they will

outgrow soon anyway – at the end of the day, the internet freedoms they do have don't mean anything without the real life freedoms to back them up. What will remain is their shared bedrock of values, which stands in direct opposition to their governments.

Peaceful resolutions to the current uprisings will depend on Arab leaders finding and using the right language to engage with their youth on their own terms. Mohammad ElBaradei called out to protestors in Cairo as Mubarak fell, 'what we started can never be pushed back'. Since the tide of Futurist belief seems only to be growing, the world would do well to listen more closely to where they're coming from.



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