



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Youth & Social Change in Jordan & Egypt

Sparre, S.L.; Petersen, M.J.

### Citation

Sparre, S. L., & Petersen, M. J. (2007). Youth & Social Change in Jordan & Egypt. *Isim Review*, 20(1), 14-15. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17209>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17209>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Youth & Social Change in Jordan & Egypt

SARA LEI SPARRE &  
MARIE JUUL PETERSEN

In studies of religious collective actors, the role of religion as a potential agent of social change has often been downplayed in favour of an emphasis on religion as a reactionary social force. Whereas recent studies of Christian organizations and movements challenge this rather one-dimensional understanding of religion, it still seems to be the dominant approach in studies of Muslim collective action. Muslim organizations and movements are frequently explained from a socio-psychological point of view, seeing collective action

as a product of structural strains and psychological discomfort. In other words, people participate in Muslim collective action because they are poor and unemployed, have no possibilities for political participation, or are frustrated over being excluded from Western modernity. As such, Muslim collective action is seen primarily as a compensatory reaction to structural changes rather than a potential force for change in itself.

While structural strains naturally play a role in the actions of most people, this perspective runs the risk of overlooking other important factors in Muslim collective action. For instance, in their focus on underlying socio-psychological reasons, such approaches often tend to downplay the individual participants' own perceptions of social change, thereby reducing their actions to more or less automatic responses to structural strains, and overlooking the purposive, reflective, and organized dimensions of collective action. We argue that a micro-level focus on concrete Muslim collective actors and their perceptions of Islam and social change can contribute to a more complex understanding of the relations between Islam, collective action, and social change. Yes, people might participate in Muslim organizations and movements because they are frustrated, poor, or unemployed. But they also participate because they see this particular kind of action as the most relevant and powerful tool for changing their situation.

## Islam and social change

A new movement of Muslim youth organizations, emerging from Egypt but spreading to other Middle Eastern countries, presents particularly interesting insights on the topic. Urban, upper middle-class young people constitute the backbone of this new movement. The majority is in their 20s, and most have been to university. In order to understand these young people's perceptions of Islam and social change, we have to turn towards the Egyptian accountant-turned-preacher Amr Khaled. Amr Khaled started preaching in mosques and private clubs in the early 1990s, and today, his shows are broadcasted on a number of satellite channels, reaching an audience of millions of young Muslims all over the world. He speaks an easily understandable Colloquial Arabic rather than the Standard Arabic spoken by traditional shaykhs, and his style is soft and compassionate, not disciplinary and strict. While others call his version of Islam "Islam light,"

**The Middle East has recently witnessed the rise of Muslim youth movements with an activist agenda. This article shows that these movements prove particularly attractive to urban upper middle class youth for whom religious engagement is about fostering the collective good as well as about self-empowerment. The authors conclude by discussing whether these movements are conducive to political action, hinder formal political participation, or should be viewed as constituting a new form of political engagement.**

According to Amr Khaled, Islam is not only about praying five times a day and wearing the hijab the correct way, and *da'wa* is not just a call to live by these rules. Islam is about changing and improving yourself and your community, and *da'wa* is a call to actively engage in this change. The overall goal is not only a stronger Muslim individual, but a stronger Muslim society, a renaissance of the Muslim world. As such, two equally important strategies of the movement are community engagement and individual empowerment, both motivated and shaped by the Muslim faith. Each in their own way, the different activities of the organizations

he says that his main concern is simply to make young people love religion instead of fearing it. Amr Khaled's ideas about Islam appear to have become firmly rooted among young Muslims. He has become the catalyst for a much broader trend, facilitated by the Internet and satellite TV, and showing in the growing number of preachers with a similar style and message, as well as in the establishment of several youth organizations based on his ideas.

Social change plays an explicit role in the discourses of this new movement.

demonstrate this intimate connection between individual empowerment and community engagement.

## Let's do it ourselves!

In his TV programme *Sunna' al-Haya* (Life-Makers), Amr Khaled called for young people to engage in their community: "Guys, don't wait for something to happen. Let's do it ourselves!" One of his first projects was the collection and distribution of second-hand clothes in poor areas. Thousands of young people participated, and in the following months, volunteer work among young people increased. This call for participation in society is articulated as a moral obligation: A good Muslim is an active Muslim.

According to the young, one of the main challenges in their society is poverty and poverty-related problems such as illiteracy, unemployment, and illnesses. They see social welfare activities as logical solutions to these problems. In a Muslim context, this focus on poverty and social welfare is nothing

new. The duty to give to the poor, *zakat*, is one of the five pillars in Islam. Likewise, activities such as taking care of orphans and poor families range high in the extensive system for rewarding good deeds, *thawab*. However, the duty to help the poor has often manifested itself in rather traditional charity activities. Few organizations have engaged in more long-term development activities seeking to empower people to break out of their poverty.

The new youth organizations introduce a different approach. This is not just about collecting *thawab* to ensure one's own place in Paradise; it is about developing the Muslim world, creating a renaissance. Here, buzz words such as capacity-building and sustainable development are often heard; several of the organizations run vocational train-

Poster for  
Resala Charity  
Association,  
Cairo



PHOTO BY SARAH LEI SPARRE, 2007

ing centres and organize awareness campaigns, some receive training from secular development NGOs, and many are getting involved in microfinance activities. In addition to this, the organizations also engage in traditional charity activities. They distribute food-bags and blankets, and they invite people to celebrate religious holidays. But they seem to be very aware of the limitations of such activities. As a young man put it: "In the end, poverty will not be solved by giving out 3,000 bags. You need to change the minds of people."

This hints at another important aspect, underlying the youth's approach to social welfare: All change must start with the individual. As such, individual empowerment is a key component in the organizations' social welfare activities. What the poor need is not just money and material goods; they need a direction in their life, and this direction is Islam. Through education, training, and conversations, the young seek to convey their ideas of a good Muslim lifestyle to the poor. Combining secular development tools with Islamic ideals and guidelines, they emphasize the importance of education, hard work, and good morals.

Through their engagement in social welfare activities, they not only try to empower the poor—by default they also empower themselves. Almost everybody says that their engagement in this work had strengthened their skills in areas such as project planning, management, and communication. The young do not just interpret these benefits as common consequences of involvement in any kind of community work. Rather, they see them as the consequences of a specific Muslim approach to community work, emphasizing efficiency, organization, and strategic thinking as important qualities in any good Muslim.

Thus, religion is what initially motivates the young people to engage in social welfare activities: To be a good Muslim is to do something for others. But, combined with secular development ideas, religion is also what provides the guidelines for *how* to do something for others. Poverty is not fought through the random distribution of zakat, but through individual empowerment, including education, vocational training, and moral strengthening. Finally, by providing concrete benefits in terms of strengthened personal capacities, religion is also what makes them *keep* doing something for others.

## You have to start with yourself

Social welfare activities are not the only concern of the youth organizations. Many also engage in so-called human and career development courses. Whereas the engagement in social welfare activities is motivated by a wish to fight poverty in general, young people engage in these courses in an attempt to solve more youth-specific problems such as unemployment, apathy, and poor quality of higher education. Successful managers in multinational companies and university professors teach courses in topics such as time management, presentation skills, leadership, business and ethics, offered to university students for free or at a very low price since both organizers and lecturers work as volunteers.

The concrete goal of these organizations is to prepare young people for a professional and adult life. On the more general level, the organizations wish to create a more effective and responsible generation of youth, able to participate in society, and thereby contributing to the renaissance of the Muslim nation. Thus, the courses become yet another concrete manifestation of the relation between social change and individual empowerment: If you want to change society, you have to start with the individual. And most importantly: You have to start with yourself.

Though most courses offered are based on American management theories, Islam plays a significant role in both practices and discourses. In fact, Islam and modern management are seen as mutually reinforcing. Through the introduction of the ideal of a so-called "Muslim professional," the effective businessman's strategies are merged with the values and morals of a good Muslim. A Muslim professional is someone who dresses properly, works efficiently, and has high moral standards. The youth organizations are managed after the model of multinational companies, but in the tight schedule, there is time for religious lectures and prayers. In fact, religious commitment and practice is expected of the organizations' members. The lecturers and organizers act as role

models for the young people, promoting the ideal of a Muslim professional. As one lecturer emphasized: "When I say that the lecture starts at six, six-o-one you're late. When I say that you have to attend three out of four lectures to pass, if you only attend two, you have failed.

There are no excuses. This is what it takes to be a Muslim professional."

Hence, Islam clearly plays a significant role when it comes to empowerment of the young engaged in these organizations. The kind of religion communicated to the participants is not so much about rituals and theological doctrine. Instead, Islam is the underlying motivation and what provides the general guidelines for the modern individual, whether it concerns major choices in life or daily interaction with friends, family, and colleagues. If understood and practiced the right way, Islam will help the individual achieve his or her goals and become an active participant in society. As a leader in one organization told me: "Our purpose is not to spread Islam—it's already

there. Our purpose is to help people grow stronger. The Prophet was a strong man, useful to his nation. He's our idol."

“... The Prophet  
was a strong man,  
useful to his nation.  
He's our idol.”

## Perspectives

It is obvious that participants in the new Muslim youth organizations articulate an intimate relation between Islam and change. Society needs change, individuals need change, and Islam is the tool to obtain this change. Problems such as poverty, unemployment, and apathy are seen as moral and social problems, whose solutions must be sought in the individual and in the community. With their faith as motivation and guiding light, young people seek to address these problems through the interrelated and mutually reinforcing strategies of community engagement and individual empowerment, and with the stated goal of contributing to the renaissance of the Muslim nation.

But one thing is how the young people understand social change and what they do to implement this change. Another thing is what consequences this will have on a structural level. In other words, and paraphrasing Foucault, the young might know what they do, but they do not know what "what they do" will do. An interesting question in this respect is whether their social engagement will develop into more formal political participation, thereby perhaps changing the current political structures in the Middle East. Given the novelty of Muslim youth organizations, such questions cannot be answered definitively at this point, and there is a need for more long-term studies. However, based on our own very preliminary observations, we propose three possible answers.

First of all, one could argue that these youth organizations might become breeding grounds for formal political actors. Obviously these organizations strengthen skills that can be characterized as essential to political engagement—skills such as argumentation techniques, teamwork, and critical thinking. However, in their current form they are characterised by an explicit lack of formal political engagement. The young see their participation as an attempt to address social and moral injustice, not political injustice, and they take no interest in using formal political channels to gain influence. This could lead one to conclude that such organizations can end up hindering formal political participation by diverting potential actors from the political scene, luring them into harmless social activities. Finally, a third perspective might see these social activities neither as harmless activities nor as run-ups to formal political participation but rather as expressions of a whole new kind of political engagement, challenging the often corrupt and dysfunctional political system by insisting on different forms and channels of participation. But regardless of which—if any—of these answers will turn out to be true, the new Muslim youth organizations present some interesting micro-level examples of how human beings understand religion as intimately intertwined with social change and how they use their religion as a relevant and powerful tool to obtain such change.

Sara Lei Sparre and Marie Juul Petersen are employed at the Danish Institute for International Studies in Copenhagen where they are engaged in a one-year project on Muslim civil society organizations in Jordan and Egypt.

Email: sls@diis.dk

Email: mariejulpetersen@yahoo.dk