

What is the Role for Civil Society, State Institutions, Entrepreneurs and Non State Actors After the Arab Spring?

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A few years ago, at the height of the Arab Spring, I was asked by a German newspaper to comment on this ongoing transformation, which at the time was baffling the Western world. These revolutions – one has to remember – ran contrary to the perception held by many that Arabs are somehow inclined to prefer despotism and authoritarian systems. What made the uprisings even more unsettling or surprising in the eyes of some Western observers was the thought that this disposition was almost genetically ingrained in the fabric of the Arabs – a racist sentiment, of course. I tried to point out in my comment that the new revolutionary forces consisted mainly of young people, who were acting outside of the existing institutions of the official system and also outside of civil society organisations. I anticipated – perhaps over optimistically – that these young people would be a game changing force to be reckoned with [1].

Looking back at this period, I have to admit that these hopes have not been realised. Young people – as I should have known – cannot easily find a place in a political system unless they surrender their demands, as these regimes tend to be dominated by older generations who tend to defend their own position at the expense of their younger counterparts. There are no big differences between Arab and Western political regimes in this regard. And so it comes as no big surprise that, as of today, the younger generation has been more or less excluded from the political and economic sphere, with youth unemployment reaching up to 30% even in wealthy countries like Saudi Arabia. No wonder, then, that the “youth bulge” of the Arab world is seen as a worrying phenomenon rather than as a potential.

Can we therefore expect Arab governments to come up with new ideas, policies and strategies to empower their younger populations – which make up almost 50% of the total population – to participate in and shape the transformation of the economy and society? I think that most people would agree that the answer is a clear no. The best one can expect for the time being is a government that does not interfere in economic processes in return for abstinence in political participation. But even this vision seems illusive, as – driven by fear of potential destabilising effects – all the governments in the region are “regulating” digital access, participation and the associated new forms of collaboration in one way or another.

Yet, if one looks beyond the obvious political atrocities and turmoil, one can’t help but notice that some younger people in the Arab world are taking things into their own hands, and often from unexpected angles, they are turning disadvantages into opportunities. Are your garbage collection services not working? Start a business that collects precious waste material and sell it back on the world market [2]. Public transportation almost not existent? Build an Arab version of the Uber platform that even works in a war torn-place like Gaza [3]. Under banking in the Arab World? Build social media applications to transfer money easily [4]. Annoyed that Arab schools are mediocre and that universities teach stuff that is of no practical use? Launch platforms that offer first-class learning content and distribute it openly [5]. Frustrated by bureaucracies that evade the issues of refugees? Arab

“Techfugee” platforms share stories of refugees and offer services for the displaced [6].

It seems that these young social and business entrepreneurs are starting to act. They’re not protesting against the system or expecting anything from the establishment. They’re building their own solutions. A commentator who has observed similar developments in the West has used the powerful phrase “*To resist is to create*” to describe this kind of transformation [7].

Thus, the advent of digital economics and politics offers new social and economic entrepreneurs the prospect of finding solutions in a “de-institutionalised” manner – that is without the cooperation or consent of traditional businesses and political actors. I truly believe that the current wave of start-up culture in the Arab world is a promising sign and a development that deserves more and better attention and support [8]. I will be accused of being overly optimistic again – but this might finally be the real *Arab Uprising*, using bits and bytes rather than barricades and blockades as avenues for change [9].

These start-ups don’t necessarily need to be about “disruptive” change in the sense of introducing world-class innovations. It is often sufficient to bring traditional business models in the areas of transportation, commerce, learning, banking and social services into the digital sphere to overcome their current dire, inefficient and ineffective performance. The digital sphere enables us to invent – or rather re-invent – new economic organisations. Why can’t we organise social services and businesses as co-ops? Co-operatives are organisations that are owned by a wide array of stakeholders, employees, producers and clients. True, these organisations tend to be less agile than smaller start-ups built using venture capital, but they can be more effective and offer opportunities for new businesses in which producers also own the assets in use (cars, IT, rooms, financial resources...) [10]. And, one might add, they offer the perfect playground for practicing democratic processes and consensus building.

Experience shows that the digital transformation is by no means an individualistic experience. Bringing people together to exchange views and experiences and embark on what Jeremy Rifkin had called “lateral learning” [11] is perhaps even more important than pure academic learning content. This is because „(...) *the skills of the cutting-edge*

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Received June 13, 2016; **Accepted** June 24, 2016; **Published** June 29, 2016

Citation: Al-Ani A (2016) What is the Role for Civil Society, State Institutions, Entrepreneurs and Non State Actors After the Arab Spring? Arabian J Bus Manag Review 6: 241.

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high-tech industries, such as computers, are generally learned on the job or through personal experience rather than in the formal bureaucratic setting of schooling" [12]. Therefore places must be found that allow people to come together, exchange ideas and "hack" products, services and culture. These places, *fab labs* or *maker spaces* could be located in schools, libraries and universities and should be the nucleus of a new entrepreneurial generation. Setting up these maker spaces is by no means a costly or difficult endeavour. If states fail to implement them, companies from all over the world looking for innovations and market entries may act as interested partners. Thus, the growing number of fab labs and maker spaces in the Arab world is a promising sign [13]. In addition, to gain more experiences, Arab programmers, inventors and creatives can always participate on international platforms that are seeking new ideas and solutions. By doing this, they gain easier access to big international brands, generate attention for their own businesses and increase their market value [14].

Finally, I would advise this new generation of social and business entrepreneurs to gain further momentum by creating common platforms and having regular meetings and exchanges in physical spaces. A meeting place that would allow this new movement to connect with each other and the rest of the world still needs to be found. And who knows, in the absence of an Arab Silicon Valley, maybe a place like Berlin could be an initial starting point for those seeking a place to meet? [15].

I have not talked much about the impact of this transformation on the political system. Obviously, at first glance this transformation is not a political one, which should make things easier. But of course, the "de-institutionalisation" of economic and social action is by itself a unique political point of view. New ways of social and economic collaboration also encourage new political points of view [16]. Once this movement becomes strong enough to offer solutions to the problems of the Arab world in the areas of education, transportation, finance etc. and also provides organisational vehicles that deliver these solutions, a transition towards these new collaborations may seem less disruptive, perhaps even natural [17]. This movement is therefore "poised to realize what the 19th and 20th century social movements couldn't" [18]. The politics of this movement would then "flow" from existing social and economic practice. That is a real key advantage. In this conception, the state could then transform from a dominant and often repressive state into a *partner state* that incorporates and supports these new solutions.

By doing so, it can achieve higher levels of participation, legitimisation and efficiency [19].

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