

The Age of Timidity Is Gone

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For decades, bad news has crowned us in the Arab world, much like an epitaph on a tombstone. And it is the very sad story of squandered youth that stands at the heart of our region's epic tale of failure:

- 40 percent of youth hugging the walls in Algeria,
- 24 percent in Egypt,
- 30 percent in Tunisia,
- 27 percent in Jordan,
- 39 percent in Saudi Arabia,
- 30 percent in Syria,
- 46 percent in Gaza...

And *when* they do finally find work, the pay is lousy, job security is nonexistent, and the working conditions are dismal.

All this, and I haven't even begun to pick at the other problems that plague us:

- Rich and poor living galaxies apart
- Endemic corruption
- Withering environments
- Deeply entrenched discrimination against women
- Pervasive abuse of civil rights

A people on the cusp of disaster, you might say, or revolution

Well, barely two months ago, I thought I would be standing here today to talk to you about Arab civil societies in quiet action for change—a story I've been telling for a while now to anyone who cared enough to listen.

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As you can imagine, it was a hard sell. In the sight of a region that seemed at a standstill, paralyzed by too many traumas and brought low by heartbreak, the verdict everywhere against our civil societies seemed as fair as it was cruel.

Worn out!

Feeble!

Stuck!

And then, Tunisians and Egyptians spoke in passionate unison.

So, I actually do get to say it in my lifetime: Vindication at last!

Vindication because what we are witnessing this very minute, here and now, did not actually happen on a whim. It happened because our civil societies finally turned out to be more alive, more vibrant, more confident, and—yes—more furious than many of us thought they were.

Vindication because, of all the calls for change, the most powerful has been the one for citizenship.

Vindication because behind the rage of it all—the collective cry for freedom, for jobs, for better pay, for security, for dignity, really—behind this collective cry for change stands the hard toil of Arab activists.

Activists of all colors, rich and poor, men and women, from within the labor movements and without, professionals and vegetable vendors, bloggers and field organizers . . .

A mass of activists who have shown us that the flipside of the famous Arab deficits cited in the UNDP's Arab Human Development Report is none other than empowerment.

And if the youth in the Arab World have shown us anything in these past two months, it is that pain and dispossession can beget change of the most dignified kind, that when time bombs explode, the results sometimes can be unusually inspiring.

They have shown us that they are actually avid readers and tuned in:

- 86 percent of them are connected to the Internet
- 65 percent are connected to social media
- 18 percent read blogs

They have shown us that women may have been left behind and out by the Arab system, but that they are at the forefront of change.

They have shown us that they have an enduring desire for democracy.

They are also telling us now, as many surveys confirm, that they prefer to work in the private sector, and that in fact half of those aged 18 to 24 intend to start their own business in the next five years.

They are telling us that they have a growing sense of global citizenship . . .

We, in the private sector, are indeed very lucky, because we, especially the entrepreneurs amongst us, know how to turn uncertainty into opportunity and transform enthusiasm into tangible achievement.

We know that this fervor in the Middle East is just as much about societies wanting a better life as they do better governance.

And we know that our companies' healthy bottom line is a sham if it is divorced from our communities' well-being.

But, truthfully, for far too long, we have been conservative, reactive, even fearful, playing second fiddle to governments and walking in the distant shadow of civil society. Almost always, we have been the most vocal apologists for the status quo.

The age of timidity is gone.

The Arab world is at a crossroads and the choices we make are of profound consequence.

Ladies and gentlemen, on May 6, 1954, 3,000 spectators gathered at the Iffley Road Track here, in Oxford, for the annual match between the Amateur Athletic Association and Oxford University.

A dreary, cold, windy day, a very lucky crowd . . . for they were about to witness Roger Bannister break the impossible four-minute mile, a feat once deemed by the American scientist G. P. Meade as beyond "the realm of reason."

Bannister's time: 3 minutes 59.4 seconds.

Only six weeks later, his own record would be beaten by the Australian John Landy, at 3 minutes 57.9 seconds. Since then, 18 new records have been reached.

Roger Bannister always comes to my mind when I think of the magnificent power of role models and of activists and social entrepreneurs in our part of the world.

Social entrepreneurs, like Maher Kaddoura, a businessman who, after the tragic loss of his son in a car accident, worked relentlessly for safer roads in Jordan rather than wait for the government to do so. In three years, the results are astounding: a 32 percent drop in fatalities from traffic accidents and a massive 46 percent drop in serious injuries.

We have Yasmina Abu Youssef, who established Khatawat, a vocational and academic school for truants in Izzbeit Khairrallah, one of Cairo's countless hazardous slum areas where close to half of the capital's 17 million population live.

We have role models like Samih Toukan and Hussam Khoury, who created Maktoob, the leading Arab online portal, and paved the way for the Arab web industry, inspiring a whole generation of web entrepreneurs.

We have people who have created networks for mentorship, like Habib Haddad, who launched YallaStartup in Lebanon, a boot camp, which brings together highly motivated developers, graphic designers, product experts, start-up enthusiasts, marketing gurus, and artists for a 54-hour event that builds communities, companies, and projects.

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We have none other than Soraya Salti, who empowers through education. Injaz al Arab, her organization, instills entrepreneurial skills and a deep sense of business ethics in youth at schools and universities across the Middle East and North Africa.

And then we have us at Ruwwad, a group of business entrepreneurs who decided to venture into social entrepreneurship and bring our skills, resources, and networks to the Arab world's downtrodden and forgotten. Ruwwad al Tanmiah, Entrepreneurs for Development, is a private sector-led model that puts entrepreneurship at the service of community development and empowerment. A youth-centric model at heart that offers education to economically and socially marginalized youth in exchange for community service. A model that taps into the resources of the community itself, thereby unleashing its creativity and generosity in finding solutions for its problems. A model that believes in people power and nurtures grassroots leadership.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have shared with you tiny, wonderful vignettes of Arab civil society hard at work in the service of the people.

I don't know what life has in store for us around the corner. But I am certain that we, the entrepreneurs of the region, must do our part in shaping it into something infinitely better than it was in the years that, thankfully, are now behind us.