Social representations of the Arab youth: Factors and trends of regional development[*]

V.I. Belov[1], E.M. Savicheva[1], E.V. Kharitonova[2]

[1]RUDN University
Miklukho-Maklaya St., 6, Moscow, Russia, 117198

[2]Institute for African Studies of RAS
Spiridonovka St., 30/1, Moscow, Russia, 123001
(e-mail: savicheva@mail.ru; evh1956@mail.ru; vyou@yandex.ru)

Abstract. The article examines the situation in the Middle East and North Africa region (the so-called 'Afrasian arc of instability') in the context of the social representations of the local youth. Based on the empirical study conducted with the authors' method, the authors assess the youth's ideas about the most important factors for the effective social-political development of the region. The research methodology is based on the analysis of 12 trends that determine the regional development in the Arab East. The study allowed to assess the social-political potential of the Arab youth as a specific and influential demographic group ready to contribute to the development agenda for the Arab East. The authors identify the Arab youth's social preferences regarding the main development trends in the region; show that in the political struggle, young people do not act alone, their aspirations are closely intertwined with national goals; prove that there is an active search for ways out of the economic crisis, for strengthening national sovereignty and ensuring peace and security. All these problems have become urgent in recent years in the Middle East region for a number of its countries strives to solve difficult problems of overcoming the destructive impact of the Arab Spring. The article presents the youth priority requests such as demands for the quality legal relations, developing national idea, and ensuring national security by strengthening military force and possessing weapons of restraint. One of the basic preferences of the Arab youth is preserving sovereignty, reducing external influences and creating a strong alliance of the Middle Eastern states. Rapprochement with leading world powers and regional associations (named as West, East and Russia) seems to be on the periphery of the Arab youth interests.

Key words: social representations; Middle East; North Africa; youth; Russia; West; East; development trends

The Arab East is one of the most volatile regions on the planet [14]. A raged struggle for energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean has become a reason for intensifying competition between the leading world and regional powers for influence and control over the region. The Arab East is one of the

critical areas of competing interests of the leading countries. Their influence in the region depends on a number of factors: economic and military factors, international communications, and citizens' social representations of the strategic trends in the development of their states. Which partner will the Arab states prefer? Will his influence be based on strength, economic interests, diplomatic capabilities, or coincidence of future development ideas? Does Russia have a chance to enforce its influence in the region?

The Middle East and North African states are in a deep crisis affecting the economic, political, legal, and social spheres. We are witnessing the conflict in power, corruption, sectarian contradictions, terrorist and military threats, and crime. For instance, in Lebanon, an increase in crime and a deterioration in the criminal situation has been recorded in recent years. In terms of the number of robberies, the average value was 6 robberies with violence per 100,000 people, with a minimum of 0 in 2008 and a maximum of 40 in 2015 [10]. Under these conditions, the Happy Planet Index, including, among other things, the subjective component, fell catastrophically and reached its historical minimum in some countries of the region. For instance, the Happy Planet Index in Lebanon decreased sharply in 2020 and reached its minimum for the period from 2013 to 2020 [9; 13]. Under these circumstances, young people are the most vulnerable category of the population, and the average unemployment rate from 1991 to 2020 in Lebanon was 7.56%, with a low of 6.14% in 2018 and a high of 8.98% in 2007 [8]. The youth unemployment rate far exceeds the national average unemployment rate: the former for the youth aged 15–24 amounted to 19.56%, with a minimum of 17.27% in 2018 and a maximum of 23.03% in 2007 [7].

The mutually beneficial relations between Russia and the countries of this highly volatile region are impossible without understanding the essence of the processes taking place there. Knowledge of the basic social needs of citizens, especially young people, their ideas about the crisis causes and ways to overcome it, development trends, and preferences in international cooperation can enhance Russia's competitiveness in the Arab world. Many states in the region, finding themselves in a difficult situation, consider different development paths, including domestic and foreign policy and the most acceptable strategic partner. The goal of Russia is to take proper scientifically grounded steps, focusing, among other things, on the collective ideas of the Arab youth.

The theoretical framework of the article is the analysis of social representations, and an assessment of the social-political potential of the

youth as a specific and significant demographic group looking forward to participation in the formation of a relevant and promising agenda for the development of countries and regions. The unifier for the Arab youth involved in political processes, despite the differences in the social-political orientation of the states, are urgent economic, social, and political tasks — finding a way out of the economic crisis, strengthening national sovereignty, maintaining peace and security. These problems have become especially relevant in the Middle East, where many countries are solving complex problems of overcoming the destructive impact of the Arab Spring.

Issues of social representations [11; 16] have been studied in Russian and foreign sociology and social psychology [1; 2; 4; 5]; however, it is mainly an undeveloped topic in Arabic studies in Russia despite its both theoretical and practical significance [6; 17] for the regional and Arabic studies. Knowledge of the region's youth ideas about the reasons for their countries' lagging behind, about the ways out of stagnation and depression and a reliable strategic partner, and, conversely, about ineffective and even unacceptable steps, can become a necessary condition and competitive advantage in establishing relations with the Arab East.

In the most general form, social ideas are defined as attitudes, stereotypes, opinions, and assessments developed in a person (a group) concerning other people, social objects, facts, phenomena, and events. The study of the social ideas of the Arab youth allows to develop a competent and scientifically based foreign policy in the region, and provides an opportunity to influence decision-making in the Arab East as in choosing a strategic partner. In the most general form, social ideas are defined as attitudes, stereotypes, opinions, and assessments developed in a person (a group) concerning other people, social objects, facts, phenomena, and events. The study of the social ideas of the Arab youth allows to develop a competent and scientifically based foreign policy in the region, and provides an opportunity to influence decision-making in the Arab East as in choosing a strategic partner.

The study aims at identifying the social representations of the Arab youth about the key causes of social-economic problems and possible ways to overcome them, and at clarifying their vision of various aspects of social development — social, legal, national, foreign, economic, military. First, the authors conducted a preliminary study of the main problem areas in the region to make questionnaires which reflect fundamental problems and main trends of regional development. The list of regional problems and

development trends was examined by experts — specialists who have lived in the region for a long time and know the situation 'from inside'. The methodology is based on the analysis of 12 regional processes and trends that determine the features of the development of the Arab East countries. The preferences expressed by the respondents (which is manifested in rank values) reflect their position regarding the strategic direction of the regional development, the causes of the crisis and the ways out of it.

The empirical basis of the study is the data from the survey of respondents — representatives of the Middle East and North Africa communities (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco) living in Russia (N = 158; 82 men and 53 women indicated their gender; respondents could also indicate their confessional affiliation — Muslims and non-Muslims). Country differences were not considered, so the data are given for the region as a whole.

Thus, 12 main development trends were identified as important for the entire Arab East. After the respondents had ranked the 12 trends of the regional development, we obtained rankings (from 1 to 12), where the preferred trends are in the first place, while the rejected trends are in the last ones. The ranking was based on the importance of the trends for solving the country's economic and political problems and for ensuring national security and stability. Respondents ranked trends on 12 items in 5 questionnaires. Each sheet asks the respondent a new specific question: in the first questionnaire, the question was "If I were a president, what would be the first thing I would do?"; in the second questionnaire — question about ways of saving the country/region; in the third questionnaire — about conditions for overcoming the crisis; in the fourth questionnaire — about challenges to the security of the country/region; in the fifth questionnaire, the respondent had to choose from 12 options to answer the question "The worst thing that is happening now in the country".

When making charts and tables, the value of each indicator was calculated as a percentage (out of the maximum possible 100%) by counting the total number of respondents' votes for it (for example, how many respondents put the indicator in the first place). A percentage system was used when constructing Figure 1 reflecting the frequency of assigning the first place to each factor in the ranking. The results of the survey are presented as a pie chart (Figure 1), Table 1, and enneagrams (Figure 2–5) — to show the preferred and rejected trends of the regional development in different social-demographic and confessional groups.

The data on respondents' preferences and rejections in general presented in Figure 1.
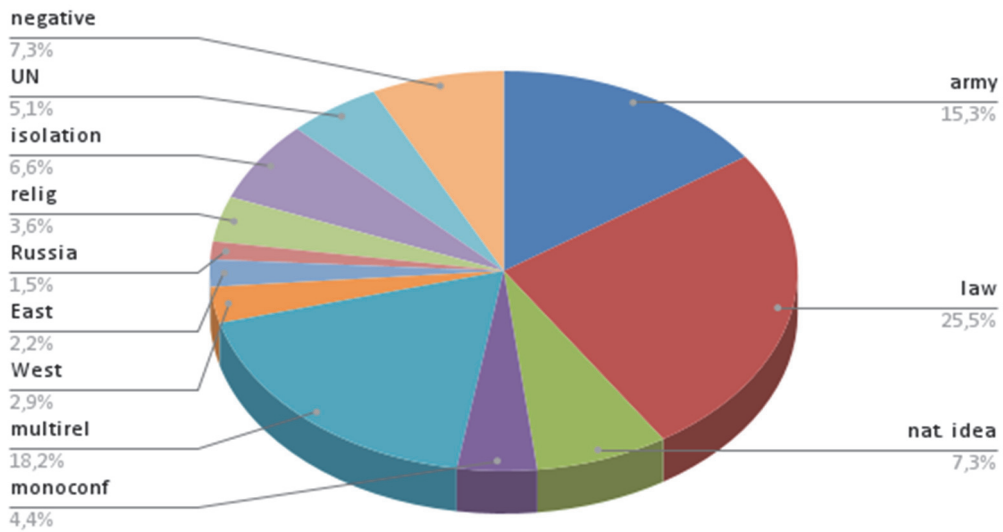
Figure 1. Respondents' preferences (in %)

Explanation of the names used:
1. Military force, militarization (army)
2. Legislative space in the country/region (law)
3. National idea, patriotism (nat. idea)
4. Implementation of a religious project (relig)
5. Interfaith harmony, secular state (multirel)
6. Development within one confession (monoconf)
7. Integration with the countries of the consolidated West (West)
8. Increasing interaction with Asian states (East)
9. Focusing on a comprehensive cooperation with Russia (Russia)
10. Sovereignty, an alliance of Middle Eastern states (isolation)
11. Commitment to international law (UN)
12. Comprehensive negative assessment (insecurity, crisis in the economy, lack of prospects for young people) (negative)

According to the respondents' preferences, the three most significant trends in the regional development were identified (Table 1).

Table 1

Major trends in the regional development

	army	law	nat. idea	monoconf	multirel	West	East	Russia	relig	isolation	UN	negative
1. choice	15%	25%	7%	4%	18%	3%	2%	1%	4%	7%	5%	7%
2. choice	12%	20%	11%	4%	18%	1%	2%	5%	9%	8%	9%	1%
3. choice	7%	16%	12%	7%	14%	6%	3%	4%	1%	20%	9%	1%

The first one is the commitment to the law, the need to improve the legal space to overcome the corruption (61% attributed the 1st rank to this trend).

Respondents' comments on the legal framework of the Arab states as a condition for developing and overcoming the crisis are related to a wide range of legal issues. Most respondents noted the need to strengthen power within the country — to implement the principle 'law and order'. They call the fight against corruption a priority, highlighting that "*weak and corrupt power leads the country to chaos and economic collapse*" and "*only strong power of the president and parliament can ensure national security*".

The second most important trend is the commitment to the inter-ethnic and inter-confessional consensus, including the intra-confessional agreement between different branches of Islam (18.2%), which suggests no single confession dominating, with the option of building a secular state being possible. It should be noted that the uniqueness of the region (it is especially evident in Lebanon) is the propagation of confessionalism in all spheres of society; confessional affiliation continues to dominate over national identity [3], and this can both consolidate and mobilize society and increase the potential for conflict. At the same time, influential political forces in Lebanon criticize the existing confessional system and insist on the need to build a contemporary secular state with equal rights for all citizens, regardless of their religion [15. P. 18]. The Lebanese President Michel Aoun called to abandon the confessional system of power formation in Lebanon and turn it into a secular state [12].

The respondents consider the trend of militarization (military force) and access to deterrent weapons as the third most important trend. This reflects the tense military and political situation in the region (terrorist threats, lack of security) (15.3%), which has worsened due to the Arab Spring affecting almost all countries in the region in one way or another.

It is followed by the national idea, patriotic education of youth, the need for life goals and orientations (7.3%). This trend, according to respondents' comments, reflects the connection between the past (respect for traditions) and the future (goals, prospects, mission).

The comprehensive trend «negative» (7.3%) indicates an intention to emigrate due to the deadlock in the country/region, life threat and inability to ensure the safety of individual citizens and society as a whole, as well as the lack of prospects for development and self-realization. This attitude is more typical in the subgroup of non-Muslim respondents. The next one is the commitment to isolation from external influence, independent development, strengthening cooperation between Middle Eastern states, and preserving state sovereignty (6.6%). Orientation to international law (5.1%), to mono-confessional development (4.4%) and implementation of the religious project (3.6%) have low ranks; however, their positions are is higher in the Muslim subgroup.

The following three positions concern the partnership of the Arab East with the international actors — Western states (2.9%), Asian states (East) (2.2%), and Russia (1.5%); all occupy the last positions, which indicates their low importance for respondents — they do not consider partnership as a key factor of the regional development and rather focus on sovereignty and overcoming external influence.

A comparative analysis of the age subgroups (Figure 2) showed the highest scores of the right, poly-confessionalism and isolation positions with the significant differences in respondents' commitment to partnership with the West, East, and Russia. In the age group over 30, the commitment to cooperation with other 'centers of power' in addition to the regional consolidation is more evident; the role of Russia in this group is estimated quite highly.

Figure 2. Comparative analysis of data (in points) by age

Range of points:
9–12 — high level of demand for a problem solution
5–8 — the average level of demand for a problem solution
1–4 — low level of demand for a problem solution
0 — unsolvable problem.

The older group scored higher than the younger group the role of international legal institutions (7.6 and 6.3 points, respectively) and the implementation of a religious project (7 and 6.1 points). The comprehensive negative trend (insecurity, economic crisis, lack of prospects for young people) has low values (1.3 and 2.8), which respondents primarily express after 30 years, and this is understandable: young people are the most vulnerable part of society, their unemployment rate is significantly higher than the average one.

When comparing the data on confessional groups (Muslims and non-Muslims) (Figure 3), the most noticeable differences are in the evaluation of the right trend: its significance is much higher for the non-Muslim subgroup, which can be an indirect evidence of the priority of the Shariah law over the secular law.
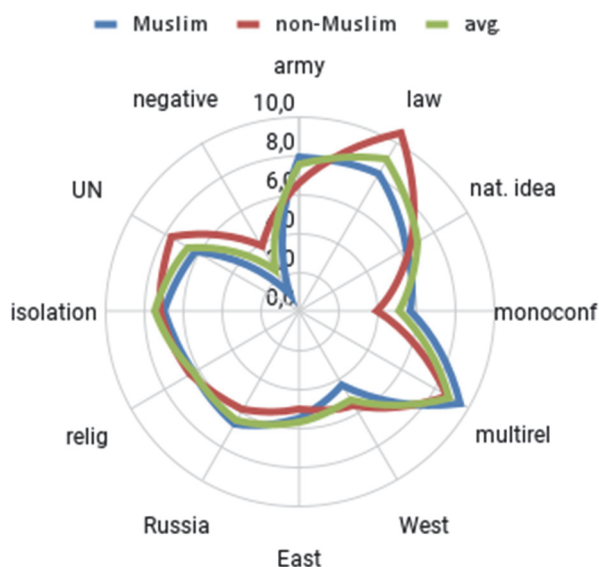

Figure 3. Comparative analysis of respondents' answers by confession (in points)

While the West position is low overall, it is weaker in the Muslim subgroup than in the non-Muslim one. Attitudes to the negative trend are significantly higher among non-Muslims (4 vs. 0), and they are more inclined to emigration. If the question was "What can ensure the national security of your country and region in your opinion?", one of the answers was pessimistic — "hardly anything can help, the situation is almost hopeless"; while one of the answers to the question "What will save your country/region?" was "nothing will save it anymore; the region and our country are at a dead-end". Regarding the economic development, one of the answers was "the economy of my country and region is moving to a crisis or collapse, and the best thing to do now is to leave". Finally, the question "What do you think young people in your country are looking forward to right now?" offered the answer "to emigrate, to live and work in a developed safe country". In general, this category of answers has the lowest positions in the ranking, but there are statistically significant differences between two subgroups: non-Muslims are more pessimistic, some of them plan emigration, while in the Muslim subgroup, the significance of the negative trend is close to zero.

As for the mono-confessionalism, Muslims rank it higher implying Islam. At the same time, Muslim respondents expressed an opinion that religious conflicts are one of the factors hindering development in the Arab East and posing a severe threat.

We also compared the responses of Muslim respondents by gender: the closest ranks in both subgroups were taken by the trends of right, Russia and isolation (Figure 4). The scores for the trend of poly-confessionalism differs the most — it is close to the maximum of 12 points for women, while Muslim men prefer the mono-confessional (Islamic) development and an Islamic religious project, they are also more interested in the development of a national idea, which proves the male population potential for radicalization.
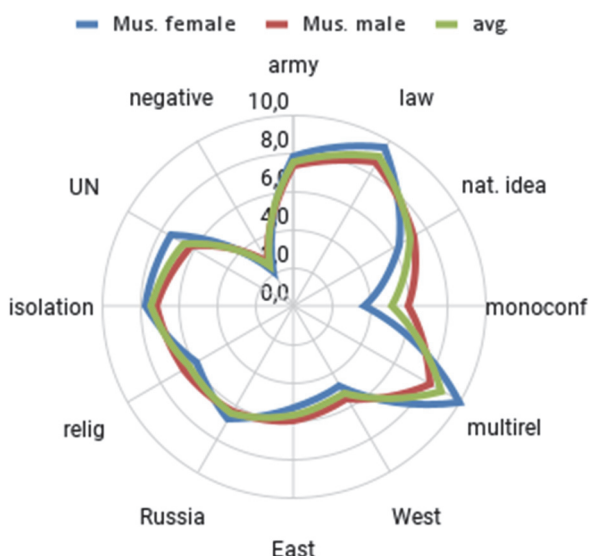

Figure 4. Gender differences in the Muslim subgroup (in points)

According to the rank correlation coefficients for the 12 regional development trends, there are no trends with positive or negative correlation. However, there is a significant positive correlation between the trends of cooperation with the East and West, which proves their equal undesirability for creating alliances in the Middle East. There is also a moderate positive correlation between the trends of cooperation with the East and Russia. Thus, respondents are committed to the idea of isolationism, sovereignty and alliance of the Middle Eastern states, which looks like an actualization of the pan-Arabism idea in the Arab world.

The most significant positive correlation was identified between the trends of national idea and mono-confessionalism, i.e., respondents supporting the role of national idea and patriotism in the development of the

Middle East region expressed the same opinion about the role of mono-confessionalism in overcoming the crisis. There is also a significant positive correlation between the trends of cooperation with the East and West (consolidation with Pacific and Western countries was not selected as a trend of the regional development): perhaps, consolidation with both Western and Pacific (Eastern) countries is considered as a threat to sovereignty and as 'external influences'. Moreover, the correlation between the orientation to the West ('democratic' values and security factor by joining Western alliances) and the orientation to international legal institutions, the UN Security Council, is almost zero.

A comparative analysis of preferences by 'status' (students, postgraduate students and employed) allowed to interpret the data more correctly (Figure 5). The average for the UN is 6.5, for the East — is 5.5, and for the West — is 3.5. The group of postgraduate students demonstrated the maximum demand for poly-confessionalism (11), army (11), law (10), and national idea (9); the group of employed — for law (11), isolation (10), poly-confessionalism (10), and national idea (7) (with zero for the negative); the group of students — for law (9), poly-confessionalism (9), army (7), and national idea (7). In general, the peaks are specific for the groups of employed and students, but all three groups showed concern about the trend of mono-confessionalism in the region (3).
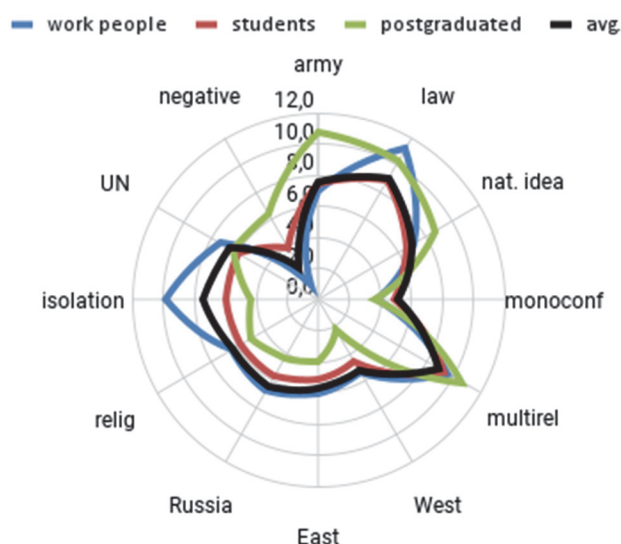

Figure 5. Respondents' preferences by 'status' (in points)

The data allows us to make a conclusion about the antiwesternization preferences of the Arab youth, which determines the declining credibility of

international organizations, including the UN, while the position of Russia is much better (6 points). In general, the survey results prove the following priorities for the strategic development of the Middle East countries, which respondents consider necessary for a better future:

– in domestic policy: improvement of the legal system to ensure security in the broadest sense (from crime in its various manifestations to the prevention of terrorist threats) within a secular state, development of small and medium-sized business and legislative support for new international initiatives in Eurasia (Belt and Road Initiative and others); formation of a political culture of a comprehensive humanitarian-economic dialogue by rejecting the mono-confessional trend of the regional development in favor of a poly-confessional symphony in the society;

– in foreign policy: implementation of a self-development course based on national and regional resources and isolation from external influences, commitment to the sovereignty; a policy of broad humanitarian-economic dialogue to overcome ethnic-religious conflicts and create a poly-confessional contour of interaction at the national and regional level, regional consolidation in order to create a strong alliance of the Middle Eastern states, development of strategic partnerships with the East (Asian states), the consolidated West (with its set of 'democratic' values and history of activities in the region), and Russia (has the greatest, but so far unstable chances).

It is noteworthy that the questionnaires contained many comments on the vital role of Russia in the region: "*For the country to survive, it must be able to protect its citizens militarily. We should have strong allies, such as Russia, to support us*".

The survey results show that the most significant causes of the crisis in the region are external influences that create military, political and economic tensions. The youth of the Arab East has no sense of hopelessness in the current difficult situation — on the contrary, the youth consider sovereignty, independent development, a strong alliance of the Middle Eastern states, national ideas and patriotic education, and abandonment of the mono-confessional trend that has dominated in the last decade as a way to find one's own path of development without external interference. The respondents express distrust in international institutions as a guarantor of peace and security in the region, and do not consider a strategic partnership and rapprochement with the West as very important. The Arab youth seem to

pin their hopes for a better future on the triad 'law — order — harmony' (or 'business — security — dialogue') together with three possible strategic partners: East, consolidated West, and Russia. Our country has a chance but not yet strong enough: this important geopolitical challenge requires both usual (political, economic, military) forms of cooperation and the tools of 'soft power'.

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