

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

From Hashtag to Blank Space: How Gen Z Protest Culture Can Reshape the Strategic Environment

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject:** “From Hashtag to Blank Space: How Gen Z Protest Culture Can Reshape the Strategic Environment”
2. **Purpose:** This paper aims to understand the reasons behind protests and riots in several countries in the past year that have been ignited by the so-called Generation Z (Gen Z) born 1997 to 2012, as well as the potential implication this may have on the CENTCOM AOR.
3. **Introduction:** In the past year, there have been numerous protests around the world rooted in the younger generation’s (Gen Z) dissatisfaction with the situation in their respective countries. In addition to the violence that has been inflicted during the protests, they have also sparked concerns and uncertainty about whether this movement could be a potential positive game changer, or conversely, a destabilizer in already volatile regions.
4. **Facts:**
 - a. Gen Z is usually defined as the generation of individuals born between 1997-2012, though there are some discrepancies in the range of years depending on the source.

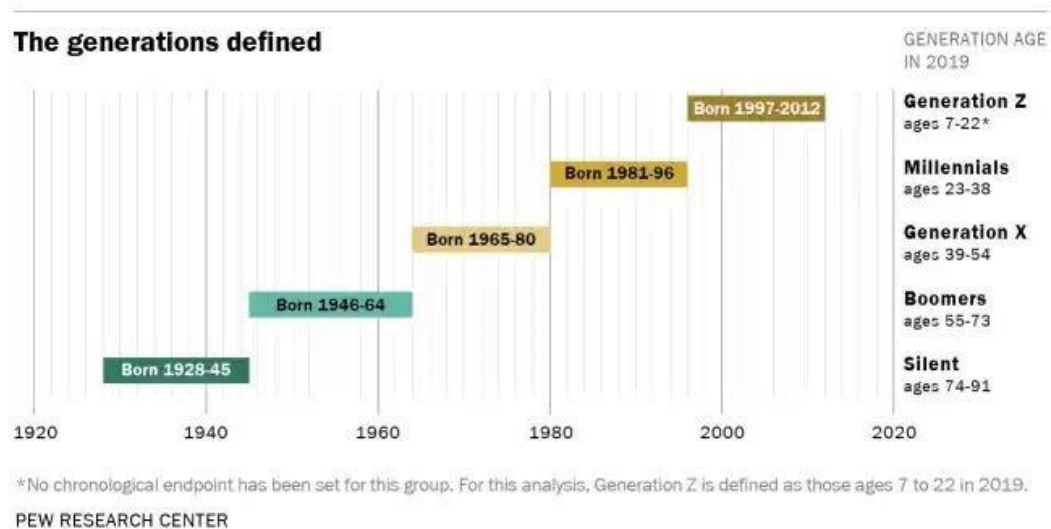


Figure 1 – The generations defined¹

- b. One of the most important features of Gen Z is that it is the first generation to grow up with access to internet and ready access to information. This affects the speed, scale, and scope of how this generation is communicating. Naturally, there are also differences in technological skills between Gen Z and previous generations, as well as their view on life since they have had access to a variety of different worlds and realities through internet and social media.²
- c. In the past year, there have been large protests and riots in Madagascar, Morocco, Nepal, Indonesia, Peru, Kenya, and most recently Tanzania, all with varying degrees of violence. The protests have reflected discontent, highlighting a broad range of issues such as political/government corruption, inequality, economic challenges, youth unemployment, and social media bans.
- d. The consequences of the protests have on some occasions been severe. In Madagascar, 22 people died and the fallout from the protests made the president dissolve the government. During the protests in Nepal around 74 people died and 2000 were injured and led to the resignation of the prime minister. The Gen Z movement in Morocco was triggered by the government's investments in the FIFA World Cup 2030, which protestors claim have been prioritized over essential services such as health care.³ In the latest large scale protests in Tanzania, hundreds of people were killed in clashes with security forces following the general election on October 29, 2025, that was plagued by accusations of oppressing and threatening opposition leaders, journalists, and civil society actors.⁴

5. Analysis:

- a. The access to internet and tech savviness of Gen Z allow this generation to coalesce movements and gather large crowds which in turn can influence decision makers. The ready access and knowledge of tools to spread information at a rapid pace and galvanize large-scale protests effectively changed the dynamic of civil movements in several countries and constituted a strategic surprise to national stakeholders.
- b. Although current protests remain scattered, unstable regions may see similar movements assert a more concerted influence. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as past events like the Arab Spring and protests in Iran showed, is especially vulnerable to rapid onset unrest.⁵ The percentage of the population in the Gen Z category is also particularly high in MENA, with an estimated 55% under the age of 30.⁶ This combined with a number of domestic political challenges and/or suppressed political and civil liberties, as well as high digital connectivity make Iran, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, countries in the CENTCOM AOR that are particularly susceptible to these social dynamics.⁷ Also, countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Syria and the United Arab Emirates may be at risk.

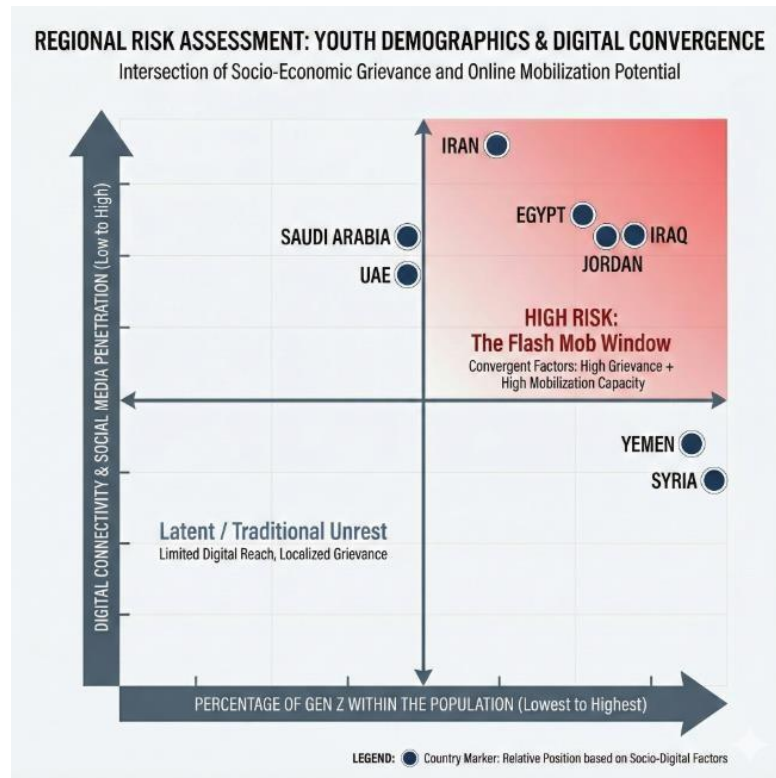


Figure 2 – Regional Risk Assessment

- c. The complicating factors with movements which have their roots online are two-fold. The first being algorithms which polarize or accentuate preconceptions, channeling content and feeding that which resonates with an audience. The discontented receive information which affirms and reinforces that feeling of discontent. The second challenge is this effect is more powerful if there are malign actors within or from outside intentionally attempting to have a destabilizing effect. Given the speed and breadth of communications in the 21st Century, this effect can gather momentum quickly.
- d. Major events like the attack on 7 October 2023, the subsequent war in Gaza or the 12-day war will likely keep fueling unrest. It seems only a matter of time before younger generations in some countries act against perceived injustices, potentially reshaping their nations. It is more likely than not that if there were a more widespread civil unrest in the Middle East, it would not come without repercussions for the military level and influence the strategic and operational environment in the CENTCOM AOR.

6. Conclusion:

- a. While protests and large-scale civil movements have become a regular feature of the socio-political landscape in the CENTCOM AOR, no clear trend can be identified at this time.
- b. Transformation of the information environment, marked by ready access to information, the rapidity and geographical reach of communication, and the employment of algorithms to meet

information consumer preferences will continue to challenge stability and therefore affect U.S. interests in the Middle East.

- c. The Arab Spring serves as a reminder of how things can rapidly change in the Middle East and is a clear example of the requirement for vigilance with the agility to respond appropriately for national advantage.

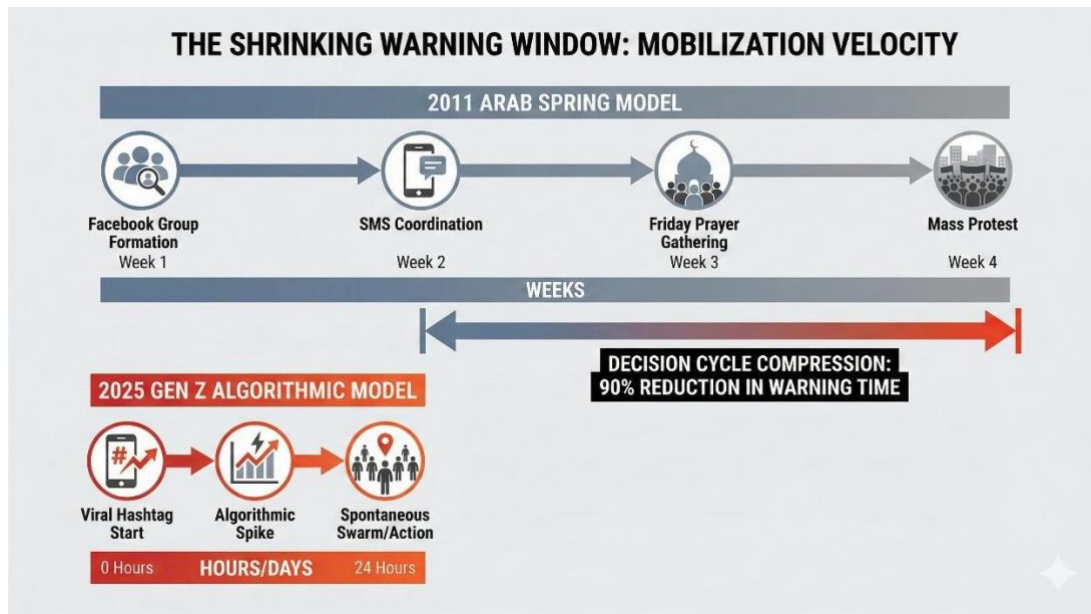


Figure 3 – The Shrinking Warning Window: Mobilization Velocity

7. Implications for USCENTCOM:

- a. The specific circumstances in the CENTCOM AOR include a high proportion of Gen Z, several countries with domestic political and economic challenges, and/or suppressed political and civil liberties. This, combined with malign actors, within and without countries in the Middle East, make a particularly fertile ground for instability and unpredictability.
- b. China and Russia may leverage any developments to expand influence and utilize events of civil unrest as opportunities to degrade U.S. leadership in the Middle East. Non-state actors such as terrorist organizations may use the information environment to push their own anti-state sentiments and try to integrate their messaging with those of the civil and youth movements. These actors are unlikely to be working in the U.S. national interests. The outcomes of this interference can adversely affect U.S. efforts to defend the homeland as well as destabilizing partners and allies.
- c. US CENTCOM will have to retain the appropriate resources to be able to monitor the situation closely and respond quickly. This brewing trend may be the new Blank Space of the Middle East, and if not paid attention to in time, this cultural phenomenon can alter both the strategic and operational environment faster than a Taylor Swift song going viral.

Sources:

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- ² Roberta and Charles Katz, "What to know about Gen Z?," *Stanford Report*, January 3, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2022/01/know-gen-z> (accessed November 3, 2025).
- ³ Amir Daftari, "Map Shows Where Gen Z Protests are Erupting Worldwide," *Newsweek*, October 3, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/map-shows-where-gen-z-is-protesting-around-world-10821626> (accessed November 3, 2025).
- ⁴ Wycliffe Muia and Lucy Fleming, "Tanzania poll protesters defies army chief as concern mounts over casualties," *BBC*, October 31, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz0x8vdkjgo> (accessed November 3, 2025).
- ⁵ Maysam Bisaer, "Iran's rising Generation Z at the forefront of protests," *Middle East Institute*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-rising-generation-z-forefront-protests> (accessed November 12, 2025).
- ⁶ Carla Seipp, "Gen Z redefining the Middle East consumer landscape," *Beauty Matter*, February 6, 2025, <https://beautymatter.com/articles/gen-z-redefining-the-middle-east-consumer-landscape> (accessed November 12, 2025).
- ⁷ *Shafaq News*, "Iraq's Gen Z faces choice: Vote or boycott in 2025 elections," October 10, 2022, <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Iraq-s-Gen-Z-faces-choice-Vote-or-boycott-in-2025-elections> (accessed November 12, 2025); *Freedom House*, "Countries and Territories," 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/scores%23~:text=Freedom%20House%20rates%20people%27s%20access%20to%20political,be%20affected%20by%20state%20or%20nonstate%20actors>. (accessed November 12, 2025).