

## The Role of Higher Education in the Arab State and Society: Historical Legacies and Recent Reform Patterns

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*Higher education institutions in the Arab states inhabit a precarious and contested terrain . . . the broader relations linking state and higher education are shaped by contending centers of power, situated within either the state or the society at large.* (Mazawi 2005, 142)

### Introduction

This article examines the historic role of higher education in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region nations, while also offering a typology of recent higher education reform strategies. I argue that MENA Region nations can be classified into two traditional models of higher education: public sponsored mobility, common in nearly all Arab States, and private-based systems, found only in Lebanon and Palestine. Within the subset of public sponsored mobility systems, I argue that these MENA Region nations are all reforming their higher education systems in the name of global economic competitiveness, yet are pursuing distinct models of reforms, namely neoliberal, quality assurance, and internationalization. Finally, I argue that these varied reform patterns imply different roles for the state in structuring youth opportunities amidst an era of globalization and suggest the need to further investigate youth perceptions of these reforms.

### The Role of the State

After World War II, the newly independent Arab States promoted an equalizing nationalist ideology and staked their legitimacy in their ability to foster economic development and provide social welfare to their cit-

izens (Cohen 2004). Education was a central component of the states' nation-building projects. Primary schools were used to instill pro-nationalist ideologies into the population and were symbols of the state's investment in its people. In contrast, higher education became an important means to garnering political support from the upwardly mobile middle classes, while also centralizing state power (Mazawi 2005). During this era higher education was free to all high school graduates and government employment was guaranteed to university graduates (Anderson 1987; Teixeira 2009). Nonetheless, access to university was tightly regulated by strict high school graduation examinations. Free higher education was often a way to train future party elites and state bureaucrats while also helping secure support from the middle classes by promising employment in the prestigious public sphere. Thus, higher education not only helped win support from the nation's petit-bourgeoisie, but also—through its tight links to the labor market—served as an important symbol of social mobility (Cohen 2004).

The two historic exceptions to the state-controlled public university system in the Arab world are Lebanon and Palestine. Unlike other Arab States, political conflict contributed to the fragmentation of state power in both Lebanon and Palestine and in so doing, undermined the ability of the state to develop and maintain a state-controlled higher education system. Lebanon's higher education system was founded by religious missionaries and remains highly fragmented along sectarian and religious lines to this day (El-Ghali 2010). In addition, Lebanon's civil war was devastating to its public higher education system, causing the national university, Lebanese University, to dismember in 1974. In addition, the war also gave rise to many universities that did not exist before, including many private and religiously

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affiliated institutions (Bashshur 2006). This high level of fragmentation and privatization helped shape Lebanon's system of private and decentralized higher education; today, more than half of all Lebanese youth are in private institutions (Nahas 2009).

Palestine offers another counter-factual to the state-dominated higher education system. It was not until the Oslo Accords in 1994 that the Palestinian Occupied Territory was permitted to have a Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Consequently, since its founding, Palestine's higher education system has been essentially private. All higher education institutions determine funding and set admissions standards independently despite efforts of national-level coordination and accreditation (Mazawi 2005; Nakhleh 2006).

These two counter examples are clearly the exceptions to the rule of Arab State control of higher education. Their distinctive historical and political situations suggest that political conflict and fragmentation undermined the state's ability to manage the higher education sector and thereby led to high levels of privatization and decentralization. Comparative research on higher education worldwide has shown that decentralization is a strong predictor of enrollment expansion (Schofer and Meyer 2005), and it seems that the Arab world is no

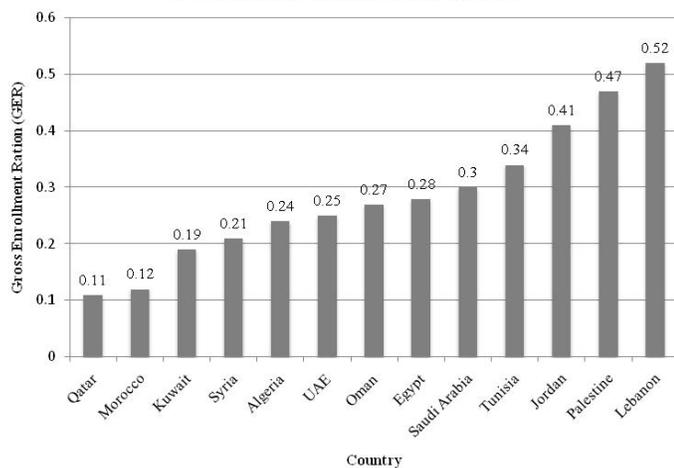


FIGURE 1. Gross Enrollment Ratios in Arab States  
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2005-2010); Syria data from Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics (2010).

exception. If we examine the current gross enrollment rates (GER) of the MENA Region in higher education,

we find that Palestine and Lebanon have the highest GERs.

### Higher Education for a Knowledge Economy

Over the past two decades, however, Middle Eastern states have been pressured to liberalize their economies by their own economic stagnation and the ascendancy of a worldwide model of neoliberal economic globalization. These neoliberal policies promulgated by the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) pushed structural adjustment policies upon many Arab nations. Consequently, state companies have been privatized, public sector employment has been curtailed and expenditures in higher education were re-routed to primary and secondary schooling (Guazzone and Pioppi 2009).

At the same time, as nations worldwide attempt to transition their economies from their traditional agricultural and industrial bases to knowledge economies, the private rate of return to higher education is increasing and populaces and international organizations alike are pressuring Higher Education Ministries to improve the employability of their populations through expanded higher education and higher quality instruction (Altbach and Peterson 2007). Among policymakers expanding higher education is seen as an important means by which the Arab world will successfully integrate its workers into the global economy (Kabbani and Salloum 2009; World Bank 2008). Consequently, student enrollments in higher education have been growing rapidly even in MENA Region nations with historically restrictive tertiary systems (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 1970-2010), as shown in Figure 2.

This rise in university enrollments is not only due to the demographic reality of a larger youth population, often referred to as the "youth bulge," but also reflects explicit policy changes on the part of governments to expand university enrollments. For example, in many states, including Tunisia and Syria, more youth have been tracked into academic pathways which lead to university, and many other countries, from Jordan, Syria and the Gulf nations, have introduced a variety of new university providers and programs to accommodate

expanding enrollments (Abdesallem 2009; Buckner and Saba 2010). These new university providers include private universities, virtual learning, and decentralized campuses, all in line with neoliberal models. Despite the rhetoric, however, we might wonder how such large scale massification, privatization and diversification are really being interpreted and experienced by youth, as they reveal a dramatic departure from prior ways of organizing opportunity structures.

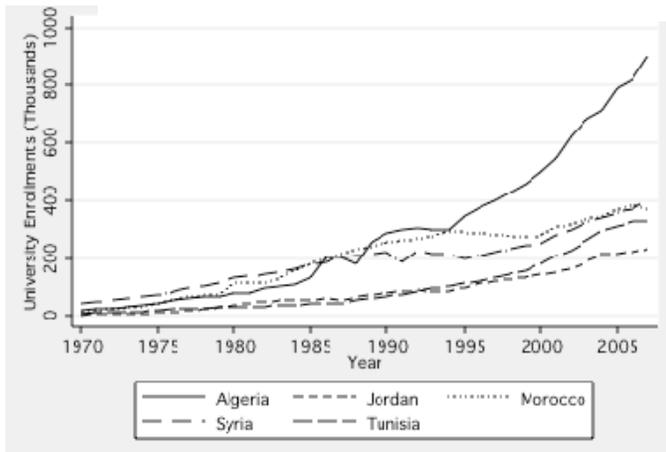


FIGURE 2. The Growth of Higher Education in Arab States  
Source: UNESCO UIS, 1970-2010.<sup>2</sup>

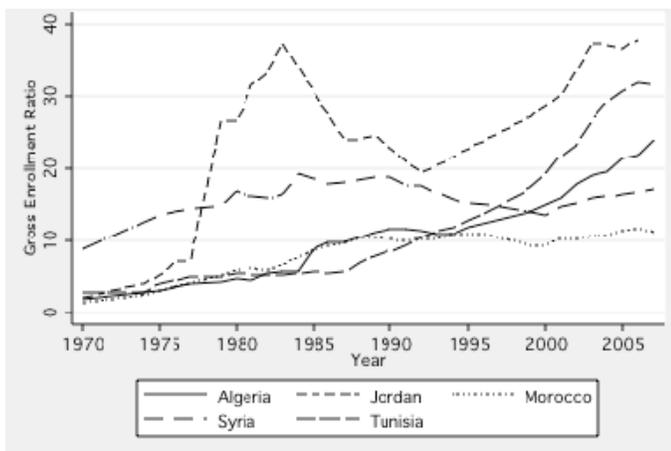


FIGURE 3. Gross Enrollment Rates in Higher Education in Arab States  
Source: UNESCO UIS, 1970-2010.

## Patterns of Reform

Most MENA Region nations' rhetoric about improving access and quality are largely similar, and all emphasize the importance of establishing a knowledge economy and increasing global competitiveness. However, there are a number of important differences in states' reform strategies. I classify states' reform strategies into three major groups: Neoliberal, Quality Assurance, and Imported Internationalization, based on the extent to which Arab States are privatizing the provision of higher education at different levels and the types of private institutions being established.

### Neoliberal Model

Neoliberal reforms aim to expand access to higher education while offsetting costs to consumers and the private sector. This includes the establishment of private universities, and programs such as "Open Learning" and "Parallel Learning" whereby students pay small fees to study programs they could not have gotten into with their grades alone. The two programs differ slightly, as Open Learning (Taleem Maftooh) allows students to take weekend courses leading to a four-year degree, often in applied fields, but does entail the same fee structure, coursework, or lead to the same bachelor's degree as students in traditional programs. In contrast, "Parallel Learning" (Taleem Mowazi) is designed for students who did not have high enough scores on their high school exit exam to be admitted to a first-choice program but are willing to pay extra to enroll in their program of choice. These programs, encouraged by many international donors such as the World Bank, are being pursued by a number of countries, namely Syria, Egypt, and Jordan (Abdel-Wahid 2009; Mazawi 2005).

Jordan was the trailblazer of the neoliberal model, passing a law allowing the establishment of private universities in 1989. Today, the percentage of the age cohort in university in Jordan reaches 45 percent and approximately one third of Jordanians are in private universities (Kanaan 2009). More recently, Syria has followed a similar reform path. After an unprecedented

law to allow the establishment of private universities was passed in 2001, today there are 20 universities in Syria, of which 15 are private, for-profit institutions. While private universities still enroll only 4 percent of total university students, it is Syria's cost-sharing program, known as Open Learning, which allows youth to pursue 4-year degrees by taking weekend courses, and today a full third of Syrian university students are in Open Learning (Buckner and Saba 2010).

Egypt and Tunisia both initiated neoliberal reforms over a decade ago. However, they have not been as successful as Jordan. Today the percentage of youth in higher education in both countries is approximately 30 percent, but the percentage in private universities is only less than 5 percent (Sedrine 2009). This raises the question of why neoliberal reforms take hold in some Arab States but not others. In addition, the general expansion and privatization of higher education raises important questions for scholars about how young people understand the role of tertiary education in their lives, as neoliberal reforms are thought to privatize economic risks and rewards of university. Many have argued that privatizing risk without offering compensating economic opportunities and welfare can trigger youth alienation and radicalism (Yusuf 2008).

### *Quality Assurance*

In contrast to the neoliberal model, North African states are emphasizing the importance of the state in providing higher education while pursuing strategies to strengthen the internal and external efficiency of tertiary education. Morocco has explored joint "private-public" partnerships that take the form of a "contract-training model" where many Moroccans are trained in private companies but receive publicly sanctioned degrees (Mawazi 2005). While this may initially seem to represent a growing influence of the private sector in the public higher education system, Morocco's approach is opposite to that of the neoliberal approach, by inviting the private sector to participate in the public provision of higher education while not passing the cost on to educational consumers. Likewise, Algeria had actually outlawed the private provision of higher educa-

tion until 2008 (Mazawi 2005). Instead of moving towards privatization, it is implementing reforms that emphasize the coordination between the higher education system and the labor market (Ferroukhi 2009).

In addition, in all three Maghreb countries of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, the Ministries of Higher Education have recently pursued large-scale quality assurance programs inspired by the Bologna process by restructuring degree requirements to accord to a Bachelors-Masters-PhD system. This approach attempts to align the higher education curricula with European models and permit the mobility of qualifications and labor cross-nationally. It is no surprise that these reforms are occurring in the North African nations which rely on external migration to Europe; however, the success of these programs at actually improving quality is still unclear (Ferroukhi 2009; Sedrine 2009; Souali 2009).

### *Imported Internationalization*

The third model of higher education policies pursued in the MENA Region is that of Americanization, whereby the desire to "modernize" higher education systems has not only taken the form of extensively privatizing the provision of higher education, like many neoliberal states, but also establishing extensive international partnerships with American and British universities (Mazawi 2005). A number of scholars have examined how these institutions are changing tertiary education in the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi (Middle East Institute 2010).

Although rhetorically, Gulf States are interested in founding a "knowledge economy," I would argue that the need for private universities is less immediate than usually portrayed. Due to their oil wealth, these states' internal legitimacy is based on providing economic welfare directly through cash benefits and government jobs rather than channels of economic opportunity. Consequently, rather than improving the quality of state-run institutions, these Gulf states have invited international universities to set up satellite campuses in their countries, with well-branded names such as Doha's Education City, Dubai's Knowledge Village and

Sharjah's University City. Qatar's Education City has tried to brand itself as the largest concentration of universities in the world—an academic metropolis that spans 14 kilometers, and brings prestigious institutions such as Northwestern University, Carnegie Mellon, Texas A&M, Cornell and Georgetown to Qatar's shores. Similarly, NYU has just built a huge international campus in Abu Dhabi to the pride of the UAE. However, as Stasz, Eide and Martorell (2007) point out, academic standards at these international institutions are very high, and only a small percentage of students actually qualify for them. In fact, Qatar University—the only public university in Qatar—enrolls 91 percent of Qatari students, while the elite universities at the Education City enroll only 9 percent (Stasz, Eide, and Martorell 2007).

We might presume that expensive, private American-style universities' primary role in Gulf states is not to educate Gulf states' students for a knowledge economy, but rather, to bring prestige and international acclaim to the Gulf States. While it is difficult to ascertain the real motivations of Gulf policymakers, Donn and Manthri (2010) argue convincingly that the policy frameworks and much of the Ministerial discourse adopted by the GCC countries regarding the privatization of higher education originates in the G8 nations and are promoted by what they call a "magistry of influence" (141). Don and Manthri are quite skeptical of current privatization efforts, arguing that the G8's particular world vision of what quality higher education entails "is not necessarily one developed in the broader MENA and may not even be appropriate for the region as a whole" (151).

### Conclusion

In summary, this article argues that despite their similar rhetoric, sub-groups of Arab States seem to be pursuing different higher education reforms, focusing on expanding access, improving quality or creating elite international institutions. These differences suggest quite different roles for the state in structuring youth educational and employment opportunities. Although a growing body of literature is emerging on higher educa-

tion in the MENA Region, very little research focuses on why different states are pursuing various policies, or how recent reforms are affecting young people or changing their expectations, options, or experiences in higher education. Considering the importance of youth incorporation, the problem of unemployment in the MENA Region, and the political ramifications of ignoring youth demands as demonstrated by recent riots in Tunisia, Egypt, and Lybia, it is worth investigating which factors shape nations' higher education policies and how youth are responding to these varied reforms.

### Notes

1. Arab nations undergoing SAPs include: Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Sudan, Turkey, Algeria, and Mauritania.
2. Egypt has also seen rapid increases in enrollments, but statistical abnormalities with how UNESCO reports enrollment data make it infeasible to plot here.

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