



Brandeis University

Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

Middle East Brief

Judith and Sidney Swartz Director
Prof. Shai Feldman

Associate Director
Kristina Cherniahivsky

Assistant Director for Research
Naghmeb Sohrabi, PhD

Senior Fellows
Abdel Monem Said Aly, PhD
Khalil Shikaki, PhD

*Henry J. Leir Professor of the
Economics of the Middle East*
Nader Habibi, PhD

*Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor
of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies*
Kanan Makiya, PhD

*Lecturer on the Myra and
Robert Kraft Chair in Arab Politics*
Lawrence Rubin

Postdoctoral Fellows
Ondrej Beranek, PhD
Howard Eissenstat, PhD
Yusri Hazran, PhD
Vincent Romani, PhD

President of Brandeis University
Jehuda Reinharz, PhD

The Politics of Higher Education in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects

Dr. Vincent Romani

The Arab world is experiencing a silent yet multidimensional revolution that needs to be closely assessed: a surge in higher education, along with its privatization and its internationalization. While in 1940 there were only ten universities in the MENA countries, by 2000 there were 140 such institutions and by 2007 their number had reached 260¹—two-thirds of which were founded after the 1980s. Last to participate in this academic boom have been the GCC countries. Eight universities were operating in Saudi Arabia in 2003, but at least 100 additional universities and colleges have been created there since, and the country's annual budget for higher education has reached \$15 billion, for 23 million inhabitants.² The United Arab Emirates and Qatar have established 40 foreign branches of Western universities over the same period.

This Brief explores the issue of higher education as a critical political problem in the Arab Middle East. After reviewing the main trends in higher education in the region, along with the principal locations and actors figuring in the current academic boom, the brief explains why higher education is a central issue in the Arab world and then proceed to analyze the broader political background underlying these new academic dynamics. Finally, the main challenges, domestic and international, facing higher education in the Arab Gulf are assessed.

Vincent Romani is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Crown Center and holds a PhD from Paul Cézanne University, IREMAM (CNRS), Marseille, France.

The opinions and findings expressed in this essay are those of the author exclusively, and do not reflect the official positions or policies of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies or Brandeis University.

Reorienting the Arab Academic Landscape?

In 2003, the United Nations Development Programme published its second *Arab Human Development Report*.³ The report included critical assessments of the poor state of higher education throughout the region and urged Arab states to invest massively in a sector that, it argued, embodied the future of their societies. Although the report was written by Arab scholars, it was criticized by other Arab intellectuals for its use of what were described as Western ethnocentric norms. But the crisis the report describes can hardly be ignored—and it actually dates from much earlier than 2003. Furthermore, major reforms were being designed before the report’s publication, addressing many of the challenges it posed.

More precisely, the inadequacy of Arab higher education relative to the fulfillment of social needs has been denounced for decades.⁴ Overvaluation of the general teaching university; poor research; redundancy of the most attractive disciplines, resulting in the demonetization of these disciplines; the related increase in graduate unemployment; the “brain drain” of the most skilled; and the unavailability of vocational training are among the principal structural problems associated with Arab higher education.

Although many Arab countries opened their academic systems to foreign and private competition after the 1980s in order to improve them, the results have been problematic. Recent projects in the GCC countries have addressed this set of problems with unprecedented funding and international outreach. Over the last five years, the GCC countries have expended at least \$50 billion on higher education, and those levels of spending continue. They reflect two main trends: first, the rapid growth of higher education in the Arab world over the last decade; and second, the emergence of the Arab Gulf as a heavyweight academic actor in the region. In order to understand the scope of these changes, one needs to assess the importance of higher education in the Arab world—and here, both nationalism and geopolitics play crucial roles.

Higher Education in the Arab World: Ancient Roots

Higher learning is deeply rooted in the history and societies of the Arab Middle East.⁵ After the seventh century and the Islamization of the Arab world, local religious schools known as *madrasa* became the main institutions of higher learning in the Middle East.⁶ They established and disseminated educational standards that are still applied in present-day universities, such as the separation of master’s from doctorate programs, tenure, and protections for academic freedom. *Madrasas* like *al-Azhar* in Cairo and the *Qarawiyyun* in Fez originated in intellectual movements such as humanism and scholasticism, which nurtured the subsequent flourishing of Western scholarship after the twelfth century.

During the same period, other institutions of the Arab world such as hospitals, libraries, observatories, and private homes known as “academies” undertook the development of the nonreligious sciences, inspired by the ancient Greeks. The most famous of these academies was the *Beit al Hikma* (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad, where numerous fields within the sciences (astronomy, physics, mathematics, medicine, chemistry, geography) flourished until the sixteenth century. By the dawn of the Italian Renaissance, the knowledge cultivated within these disciplines and others had been translated, and transmitted to Europe through Italy and Spain.

As dominance over the Mediterranean shifted to Europe after the sixteenth century—only to increase during the Renaissance and, subsequently, the Industrial Revolution—the place of the Arab Middle East in the academic world underwent a dramatic reversal. Yet the Ottomans, who ruled the Arab world throughout this period, strove as early as the eighteenth century to get their Empire back into the academic game. In 1720, the Sultan Ahmet III sent delegations of scholars to Europe in order to obtain translations of Western scientific books. This pattern reached its peak during the reign of Mohamed Ali (r. 1805–49), when dozens of modern institutions of higher learning were established on the European model, mainly in Egypt. Meanwhile—in fact, since the eighteenth century—European missionaries, followed by American Christians, were founding dozens of schools and institutions of higher learning in the Middle East, while the French established institutions of higher learning in North Africa. Thus, neither the globalization of higher education nor “Westernization” is a new trend in the Middle East.

Higher Education as National Symbol and Political Tool

In the course of the nineteenth century, higher education clearly became a nationalist issue as well as a geopolitical tool in the Middle East.⁷ Increasing resentment in the region against both Western imperialism and Ottoman rule contributed to education being seen as a means of acquiring power. As local nationalist forces struggled to gain control over educational institutions, Western powers overtly competed with each other to establish such institutions until the end of World War II. In a 1927 report commissioned by the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, the historian James W. Headlam-Morey, defending the establishment of a British university in Jerusalem despite the proximity of the American University of Beirut, argued that “[i]t seems indeed almost derogatory that this country [that is, Great Britain], which has played and is playing so leading a political part and exercises so great an influence over the political future of these countries, should be content to hand over the important work of higher education to an institution, however admirable, which is situated outside those districts which are under British control. . . .”⁸

Geopolitical and nationalist dynamics, then, combined to convey on higher education a powerful political symbolism, especially in Palestine and Egypt. Schools and universities nurtured nationalism throughout the region, and the new states emerging from decolonization moved swiftly to control the campuses on their soil. Indeed, campuses remain a central concern for contested regimes, which

regard student masses both as a means for controlling their people and as representing a potential risk of *losing* control.

Besides contentious politics and geopolitics, another local dynamic fostered the political dimension of universities in the Arab world after World War II and the emergence of numerous independent states: In search of legitimacy, new regimes have engaged their countries in ambitious development programs, with a special emphasis on science and education. Indeed, many state policies were presented and enforced in the name of science, for the sake of the nation.⁹ Within this context, new governments developed and funded large general teaching universities, while committing the state to providing every graduate with a job—in Egypt, for example.¹⁰ From Iraq to Morocco, dozens of universities were founded, as thousands of students were enrolled in what were considered national flagship institutions. Throughout the region, higher education thus went from class to mass.

In the later Palestinian case (after the 1970s), this trend has taken the form of “university nationalism”: The academy was urged to secure the survival of the nation and of its people by means of learning. Hence the Palestinians’ obsession with diplomas, sought as replacements for lost land-capital. Outside of Palestine, however, and as early as the 1970s, this “scientific development” model fell short of success, unable to curb massive graduate unemployment or to secure national economies. Indeed, campuses in many Arab countries are seen (and used) as waiting rooms, temporarily saving their attendees from unemployment.

Yet, people’s expectations regarding Arab universities remain high, partly because of the political pacts struck after the 1950s between citizens and state-funded universities. The realities of demographics certainly play an important role: Half of the population of the Arab world is below the age of 18. Given the availability of universal secondary education, this dramatically increases the prospects of significant college enrollment in the future.

At the same time, the enduring belief in the potential of the Arab academe engages the interest of opposition parties in establishing constituencies on campuses, thereby impelling Arab governments to seek to control those same universities. As a result, most of the universities in the Arab world shifted a long time ago from being matrices of development to becoming objects of policing. Practically, this is illustrated by the presence of intelligence services on campuses, and the consequent control that they exercise over the faculty and the student body.

The overpoliticization of higher education, though largely downplayed in the aforementioned Arab Human

Development Report, is an important aspect of the higher education crisis in the region. Given this politicization and the major governmental funding that sustains it, the challenge for education reformers is: How can reforms cope with the huge governmental stake in Arab higher education, and the concomitant constraints that Arab governments impose? For now, in spite of reforms and privatizations, these problems and constraints have left Arab higher education in a miserable state.

The GCC Academic Revolution

The continuous Arab academic expansion in the Gulf over the last decade reflects ambitions beyond the region. It is taking place in the wider context of the opening of a globalized market of higher education throughout the world, of which GCC countries intend to claim more than their share. And by founding world-class, top-ranking universities, Gulf political leaders seek not just to close the “development gap” in their countries; they explicitly intend to reverse the balance of knowledge between the West and the Middle East. Their aim is to change the Arab academe from a site for knowledge *reception* to one of knowledge *production*.

One important pattern characterizing the current academic boom is a dual process of *privatization amidst globalization*. Two-thirds (around 70) of the new universities founded in the Arab Middle East since 1993 are private, and more and more (at least 50) of them are branches of Western, mostly American, universities. (In 2008 even the most state-centered country, Saudi Arabia, whose government runs eight public universities, accepted the founding on its soil of two private universities and of numerous new private colleges.) And inevitably, more and more non-citizen staff and faculty will have to be recruited to sustain this institutional blossoming. Indeed, the idea of the Gulf becoming a new major academic player is beginning to spread throughout the Arab world, attracting faculty, students, and researchers from within the region and beyond.

Three places of especially flourishing academic activity are Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Each of these countries, however, has followed a distinct pattern of academic development; together, they also exemplify three degrees of state control over higher education. In Qatar, funding is mainly governmental, through the Qatar Foundation. Since 2003, Qatar’s Education City has welcomed at least 8 universities (6 American, 2 Australian), and more are to come. Qatari funding tends to cover the bulk of the construction costs, but foreign universities remain private institutions.

In the UAE, Dubai International Academic City, established in 2007 as part of Knowledge Village (a free trade zone), now houses 32 branches of foreign universities from all over the world. Financial responsibility is more symmetrical, as these branches are expected to cover their own costs in what is designed as a co-investment operation.

In Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology is scheduled to open in September 2009. Its \$10 billion endowment, coming directly out of the King’s purse, makes this university the sixth richest in the world, even before it opens.¹¹

These three patterns of academic reform are either mostly market-driven (like in Dubai), or mostly state-driven (like in Saudi Arabia). And just as market-oriented reforms have certain advantages (for example, greater elasticity and adaptability), they are at the same time susceptible to some weaknesses currently exposed by the current financial crisis. The recent failure of the establishment of George Mason University in Dubai is a good illustration that short-term for-profit academic ventures are not always economically sustainable in harsh times.¹²

Higher Education in the Region: Contradictions and Uncertainties

Despite the attention that the new projects have attracted, higher education in the Gulf is not new. State universities were founded beginning in the 1960s, after the GCC countries secured their independence. Their poor results in terms of manpower training led to the first wave of openings of private universities during the 1990s, but the achievements of the latter were just as meager.¹³ Two specific circumstances, aside from the demographic realities mentioned above and the overall need of post-oil rentier economies for knowledge-based societies, underlie the post-2000 academic boom. First, between 25% and 75% of the population of the various GCC countries are foreign expatriates, an increasing proportion of whom have the wealth and will to provide their children with high-quality national or international higher education in their host countries.¹⁴ Also, since the September 11, 2001 attacks, escalating security constraints have impeded Arab students’ mobility vis-à-vis the West. Hence, many more of them prefer to study in their home countries.

The immediate tangible expression of the blossoming of Arab academe is a dramatic improvement in the academic offerings in the region, both in quality and in quantity. While many hope that this boom will exert a domino effect by improving education, economy, and social welfare throughout the Arab world, others worry that it reflects a

further intrusion of the West inside the Arab world. But the actual result may be the opposite: The development of local higher education may eventually relocate previously mobile student populations in stable enclaves within the Arab Middle East, and foster a collective Arab identity at the expense of the overture to the West. Furthermore, previous experience shows that imported knowledge, techniques, and institutions can be domesticated.¹⁵ These phenomena, therefore, require cautious interpretation and forecasting on the geopolitical level. Toward this end, four central questions need to be addressed.

The Political Sustainability of the Higher Education Boom in the Arab Middle East

The GCC countries are described by many as islands of wealth, stability, and freedom in an ocean of turmoil (Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon) and harsh dictatorships (Egypt, Syria). However, neither analysts nor human rights NGO's consider any of the GCC countries to be democratic or liberal. This raises the question: How sustainable are the educational reforms in these countries? The Gulf States retain a primary interest in exercising political control over society, as well as in securing the primacy of their own citizenry vis-à-vis foreign residents.¹⁶

This is particularly true in a politically highly contentious time, in which security considerations receive high priority. Thus the questions of academic freedom and quality in GCC countries: To what extent are these regimes prepared to absorb, and cope with the results of, the world-class-quality research they are anticipating? Although excellent research can be produced under authoritarian rule, few academic disciplines can thrive under such constraints. Yet, little has changed in most Gulf countries since the 1990s, when scholarly research on social, religious, cultural, and ethical issues was severely restricted.¹⁷ The humanities, social sciences, and liberal arts cannot be expected to develop in highly conservative and authoritarian settings—which explains the expected focus of the new curricula on the “exact sciences,” and the expected “domestication” of the social sciences within a framework of social engineering. A delicate balance will have to be attained and preserved.

In the realm of academic governance, independent faculty senates are absent, while intrusive political funders are present.¹⁸ And from the perspective of outside the Gulf, to what extent are top-ranking foreign academics ready to live and work in authoritarian countries? Repressive local laws against homosexuality, for example, kept the University of Connecticut from closing a deal with Dubai.

The Local Legitimacy of New Campuses

Tens of thousands of new students will be populating new campuses—in effect, new public places. Worldwide

experience shows that the politicization of campuses is common, especially in highly contentious contexts. The new campuses could be perceived as “run by foreigners” and as “corrupting the youth” and might become arenas of protest. State agencies of coercion will seek to surveil and control these new concentrations of youth and these new intellectuals, again raising concerns with respect to academic freedom.

More fundamentally, the societal impact of these new campuses may involve the territorialization and legitimation of academe. If these new hubs of knowledge fulfill their promise, they will bring into play new approaches to teaching and learning and new conceptions of social and gender relations, with a predictable subversive impact. One can expect, for example, that these new high-quality universities will be primarily attended by female students who were formerly prevented from studying abroad by conservative norms.

GCC societies cannot remain immune to such massive importations of manpower and knowledge—and of American-style higher education generally. The solution of offshore campuses in remote educational cities has been adopted by Qatar and the UAE. By protecting the society the institution is supposed to serve, this sort of setting preserves the campus's legitimacy at the expense of its territorialization—whereas integration into society could put that legitimacy at risk. There is, thus, very limited room for maneuver with respect to these new academic policies: If they are successful, they could well threaten social stability.

Nationalism vs. Internationalism

Even if, to a certain extent, higher education can expand while preserving the internal political order in the Gulf states, it is highly unlikely that the influx of new higher education venues can proceed without engaging the conflict between nationalism and the necessary *internationalism* of the projects. First, the increasing privatization of the academic boom could deprive the region's states of the usual means of control they had available in order to govern universities. One such tool, exercised extensively in Saudi Arabia, is the ability to distribute academic positions. The elimination of this tool is sure to frustrate elements within the state apparatus.

Second, the expansion of academe is proceeding in contradiction to the policies of nationalization of manpower that GCC states have tried to enforce during the past decade.¹⁹ The scale of the projected academies exceeds by far the capacities of the local workforce—and the international scope of these academies forbids any nationalist preference in hiring in any case. Thus the paradox, and the irony: The nationalist project of fostering

world-class universities in order to secure national independence has required increasing resort to foreign institutions and manpower, and hence greater dependence *on* foreigners.

The question remains whether the project of higher education can be successfully implemented despite these contradictory dynamics. One can assume that at least during the first decade, the recourse to foreign faculty will be dominant. Academic autonomy will only be achieved once local faculty can be installed and after PhD programs have been effectively operated and doctorates awarded. The exposure of these new campuses to international faculty, then, should last at least ten to fifteen years. Only then would Gulf universities be able to hire the majority of their PhD teachers locally.

Regional Discrepancies

Another concern raised by the new developments described here is the regional discrepancies that may increase as a result. Egypt, which for a long time attracted masses of Middle Eastern students, now faces a social, political and economic crisis resulting from the loss of competitiveness of its higher education institutions. These institutions no longer provide high-quality higher education and hence no longer attract foreign students—or Egyptian students, for that matter. Current structural reforms and increasing privatization seem insufficient and have come too late to enable Egypt to restore its past influence—and so the flow of foreign students into the country is likely to continue to decrease.²⁰

The attractiveness of the GCC academe also threatens to alter the brain drain that Egypt and other Middle East countries are suffering. Some 1.4 million Egyptian workers currently work in GCC countries; most of the numerous Arab Gulf colleges are run by Egyptian faculty. Both the nationalization of manpower and the high level of excellence sought in new faculty recruitments in the GCC countries will shift the movement of academics, at the expense of Egypt. Growing numbers of Egyptians may be trapped inside their country, while only the most talented will continue to migrate to the GCC. Dead end for most, brain drain of the best: The future looks grim for Egypt, which with nearly 80 million inhabitants is both the most populated country in the Arab world and nearly its poorest. Other Arab countries are on the verge of similar crises—like Algeria, which exports half a million of its working nationals, mostly to Europe. But Europe is increasingly closing its doors and building walls along its southern borders.

If the GCC countries succeed in their knowledge revolution, it could detach them from the rest of the Arab world in terms of academic and scientific quality, and thereby might accelerate social and political crisis in the weakest countries in the region. In the worst case, the Gulf could join a North African “academic buffer zone,” attracting students from the South unable to reach the North and providing them with Western-style higher education.

Conclusion

The current higher education boom in the Gulf unquestionably augurs dramatic social, economic, and political changes throughout the Middle East. An immediate question relates to the economic sustainability of this boom amidst the turmoil of the current financial crisis. This Middle East Brief shows that only the most market-oriented projects are vulnerable to international economic conjuncture: While many projects in Dubai are certainly threatened, those with higher state investments face lower risks. The longer-term question remains whether the academic revolution we have documented will act as a democratizing agent or as an agent of reaction. The search for knowledge through higher education functions in the region both as an act of political faith and as a new paradigm for development. For now, one can only note that it introduces strong agents of transformation into the region, which could lead to further wealth and development—and might, if properly activated, serve as means of democratization as well.

Endnotes

- 1 André Elias Mazawi, "Aspects of Higher Education in the Arab States," *International Higher Education* 18 (Winter 2000), and A. Mazawi, "Geopolitics and University Governance in the Arab States," *Ibid.* 34 (Winter 2004).
- 2 Zvika Krieger, "Dubai, Aiming to Be an Academic Hub," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 8 (October 2007), and Zvika Krieger, "Saudi Arabia Puts Its Billions behind Western-Style Higher Education," *Ibid.* 54, no. 3 (September 2007).
- 3 [United Nations Development Programme \(UNDP\), *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*, \(New York: United Nations Development Program Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2003\).](#)*
- 4 Ronald Sultana, "Les défis de l'enseignement supérieur dans les pays méditerranéens," *Monde arabe Maghreb-Machrek*, 171-172 (June 2001), pp. 26-41.
- 5 For a general assessment, see Linda Herrera, "Higher Education in the Arab World," in *International Handbook of Higher Education*, ed. James Forest and Philip Altbach (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), pp. 409-21.
- 6 George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), and George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).
- 7 Herrera, "Higher Education in the Arab World."
- 8 Pinhas Ofer, "A Scheme for the Establishment of a British University in Jerusalem in the Late 1920s," *Middle Eastern Studies* 22, no. 2 (April 1986): pp. 274-85.
- 9 François Siino, ed., "Sciences, savoirs modernes et pouvoirs dans le monde musulman contemporain," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (REMMM) (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 2003).
- 10 Iman Farag, "Egypt," in *International Handbook of Higher Education*, pp. 693-709.
- 11 Krieger, "Saudi Arabia Puts Its Billions behind Western-Style Higher Education."
- 12 [Andrew Mill, "Failure of George Mason U.'s Persian Gulf Campus Sparks Concerns about Overseas Ventures," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55, no. 27, \(March 2009\).](#)*
- 13 Shafeeq Ghabra and Margreet Arnold, "Studying the American Way: An Assessment of American-Style Higher Education in Arab Countries," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* no. 71, June 2007.
- 14 John Willoughby, "Let a Thousand Models Bloom: Forging Alliances with Western Universities and the Making of the New Higher Education System in the Gulf," Working Paper Series no. 2008-01 (Washington, DC: American University, Department of Economics, 2008).
- 15 Sylvie Mazzela, "Une 'libéralisation d'État' de l'enseignement supérieur? Mutations internationales et évolutions Maghrébines," *Alfa* (Tunis: Institut de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain, 2007), pp. 15-22.
- 16 André Mazawi, "The Academic Profession in a Rentier State: The Professoriate in Saudi Arabia," *Minerva* 43 (2005): pp. 221-44.
- 17 Muhammad Morsi, *Education in the Arab Gulf States* (Doha, Qatar: University of Qatar, Educational Research Center, 1990).
- 18 Willoughby, "Let a Thousand Models Bloom."
- 19 Andrzej Kapiszewski, "Arab versus Asian Workers in the GCC Countries," Working Paper (United Nations, Population Division, May 2006).
- 20 Farag, "Egypt."

* Weblinks are available in the PDF version found at www.brandeis.edu/crown



Brandeis University Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

Middle East Brief

The Politics of Higher Education in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects

Dr. Vincent Romani

Recent Middle East Briefs:

Available on the Crown Center website: <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown>

Khalil Al-Anani, "Jihadi Revisionism: Will It Save the World?" April 2009, No. 35

Nader Habibi and Eckart Woertz, "U.S. - Arab Economic Relations and the Obama Administration," February 2009, No. 34

Ondrej Beranek, "Divided We Survive: A Landscape of Fragmentation in Saudi Arabia," January 2009, No. 33

Shai Feldman and Khalil Shikaki, "Policy Options: The Obama Administration and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," December 2008, No. 32

Nader Habibi, "The Iranian Economy in the Shadow of Economic Sanctions," October 2008, No. 31

