CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PUBLIC POLICY

THE ARTS
CHILD POLICY
CIVIL JUSTICE
EDUCATION
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
NATIONAL SECURITY
POPULATION AND AGING
PUBLIC SAFETY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
SUBSTANCE ABUSE
TERRORISM AND HOMELAND SECURITY
TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
WORKFORCE AND WORKPLACE

This PDF document was made available from www.rand.org as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Jump down to document

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

Support RAND

Browse Books & Publications

Make a charitable contribution

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org

Explore RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy

View document details

This product is part of the RAND Corporation reprint series. RAND reprints present previously published journal articles, book chapters, and reports with the permission of the publisher. RAND reprints have been formally reviewed in accordance with the publisher's editorial policy, and are compliant with RAND's rigorous quality assurance standards for quality and objectivity.

SAIS Review vol. XXVI no. 2 (Summer–Fall 2006)

Fixing What's Wrong—and Building on What's Right—With Middle East Education

Cheryl Benard

Over the past few decades, development experts have placed great emphasis on the crucial role of education in improving social, economic, and political conditions in the Middle East. Significant regional and international resources have been invested in education. But the gains have been uneven, and it is time to pause and assess the results. Most troubling is the missing correlation between educational advances and economic opportunity. The anticipated links—from schooling to employment, and from education to social stability—are absent in many locations. In some places, progress in these areas has even been reversed. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on the socialization and life-competency aspects of education. Reforms should seek to structure the education system not only according to abstract international standards of pedagogy, but in closer alignment to feasible economic links and to civic values. Rather than overarching goals related to abstract measures such as literacy and testing scores, success should be measured by whether graduates are able to find work and develop an identity as productive citizens. Further, resources should support positive trends. In reviewing what has worked best, it becomes apparent that educational investment has been particularly helpful for young Arab women, who show significant and in some instances dramatic improvement in educational levels and economic participation. Along with these gains have come changing attitudes and increased support for women's education by parents, educators, and communities, showing that positive outcomes can help change attitudes.

Analysts have placed great emphasis on education as an important part of the solution to the problems facing Middle Eastern societies. Major investments of resources and infrastructure have reflected this emphasis. Given the region's demographics—the proportion of individuals below age 25—the focus on education is certainly logical. But is it working?

Cheryl Benard, a senior political scientist with the RAND Corporation, is the director of the RAND Initiative for Middle Eastern Youth. She received her B.A. in political science from the American University of Beirut and her doctorate from the University of Vienna. She has published widely on issues related to political Islam, radicalization, post-conflict nation-building, youth issues, and women in development. Her publications include *Veiled Courage* (Random House 2002), which describes various forms of civil resistance against the Taliban during the years of their rule, and *Civil Democratic Islam* (Rand 2004), which suggests a way to better understand Islamic groups and movements by aligning them along a differentiated ideological spectrum. She is also co-author of *The Muslim World After 9/11* (RAND 2004) and co-sponsored the compendium "Best of Muslim Family Law," featuring the most important recent reforms in the legal codes of Islamic countries.

© 2006 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

This paper will argue that education in the Middle East can be a tool for change, but not an independent agent of change, and that this differentiation helps explain why the major educational inputs in this region are producing only mixed results. After identifying what is working and what is not, it will conclude with recommendations for a more effective education policy.

The Aggressive Pursuit of Education as a Key to Development

Over the past few decades, development experts have placed great emphasis on the crucial role of education in improving social, economic, and political conditions in the Middle East.

Some stressed the economic results: A population enjoying universal basic education, and led by a competent professional elite, would be more able to close the gap between itself and the more advanced countries; its individual members would be able to pursue activities designed to sustain and improve their own lives and those of their families; this would raise the overall quality of life, reducing radicalism and increasing hope; societies would become more prosperous and stable, and extremists would lose ground. Some emphasized the political gains: An educated population would participate in political processes and engage in democratic decision-making; educated individuals would be willing to understand and respect the rights of others, helping to overcome the prejudices and hatreds of the past. Another set of experts placed the focus on social impacts: By better understanding the costs and consequences of varying social arrangements, educated populations would make better choices and end some of their archaic and counterproductive traditions. Education would lead to better hygiene practices and better health, improved care of children in smaller families, and more egalitarian interactions that raised overall levels of well-being. Together this set of changes would help produce a "demographic transition" from large, hierarchical families with low life expectancy and high child mortality to smaller, more egalitarian families, high life expectancy, greater prosperity, and lower levels of conflict.[1]

Whatever the emphasis, beginning in the 1980s most experts had great expectations for education as a solution to underdevelopment. Programs by United Nations agencies, NGOs, and the aid agencies of governments of the industrialized nations all supported these efforts financially, through planning and programs, and through the provision of experts. These programs set millennium goals. They also devised ways to measure progress and issued reports at intervals to let countries know where they stood. Special target programs sought to eradicate illiteracy and eliminate egregious gender gaps.

A Significant Investment in Education Yields Gains

These efforts met with measurable success. By and large, experts consider the Middle East during the past few decades to have "recorded impressive expansion in education, including relatively high rates of human capital

accumulation as measured by average schooling per adult population."[2] This was the fruit of a significant fiscal commitment as well as a concerted push by international development agencies.

Statistics showed high growth rates of educational achievement (average years of schooling per population), with the Middle East clearly surpassing South Asia, East Asia, and the average rates for all developing countries. Table 1 shows statistics on enrollment, literacy, and GDP per capita in the Middle East.

To achieve this, Middle Eastern countries spent almost as much on education, as a percentage of GNP, as the developed industrial countries did. Average spending on education from the 1970s to the end of the century was 4.73 percent—higher than the world average of 4.1 percent and the low- and middle-income country average of 3.64 percent.[3] See Table 2.

Although significant variations in the success of universal enrollment efforts remain,[4] in general terms basic education expanded significantly. As mentioned above, international bodies set "millennium goals" in the field of education, periodically assessing whether developing countries were on track. One such goal has been the achievement of universal primary education by the year 2015. According to UN and UNESCO estimates, seven Middle East/North Africa (MENA) countries are "unlikely" to reach this goal (Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen), while two are "very unlikely" to reach it (Iraq and Jordan).[5] But for the remainder, the goal is considered "possible" or "likely."

Two factors prevent this from being a rosy picture. First, there are signs of backslide in some areas. By the end of the 1990s, the first impetus of reforms had exhausted itself, and educational investment had begun to decline in about half of the region's countries.[6] Jordan showed signs of stagnation, with some increase in adult illiteracy. Algeria and Saudi Arabia had low achievement. So did Iraq, and that was before the war and the insurgency further devastated the education system. Secondly, and we may assume this is a partial contributor to the first problem, countries are finding that their investment in education has not produced the expected social and economic outcomes.

Investment in education has not produced the expected social and economic outcomes.

Unemployment rates are high, and the educated are not exempt. Radicalism has certainly not declined, and terrorist profiles reveal that it is quite possible to be highly educated and possess excellent career opportunities, yet still choose violence. Many advances have remained in place but have failed to yield further progress. Decades into this expensive education effort, contemporary writing about the Middle East speaks of a "weak performance" and "a blighted region."[7]

Region-wide, the investment in education is not showing the expected returns. Citing a number of studies that failed to find the expected economic gains from education, some experts confess bafflement:

Table 1. Enrollment, Literacy, and GDP Per Capita

Country	Gross Enrollment Ratio (as a percent)	Adult literacy rate (15 and above)	GDP per capita (US $)
Algeria	74	69.8	6,107
Bahrain	81	87.7	17,479
Egypt	74	55.6	3,950
Jordan	78	89.9	4,320
Lebanon	79	86.5	5,074
Morocco	58	50.7	4,404
Syria	62	82.09	3,576
Tunisia	74	74.3	7,161
Iraq	63	39.7	unknown
Libya	96	81.7	6,697
Kuwait	74	82.9	18,043
Qatar	82	89.2	19,844
UAE	74	77.3	22,420
Saudi Arabia	57	79.4	13,266
Yemen	55	49	889

Source: UNDP, Human Development Reports, 2005

> "From the . . . evidence, it is . . . clear that the rate of return to education in Arab countries does not seem to conform to the general patterns based on the compilation of evidence from around the world. This signals a peculiarity of the region that needs further study for more clarification."[8]

Some even fear that "education has begun to lose its significant role as a means of achieving social advancement in Arab countries, turning instead into a means of perpetuating social stratification and poverty."[9]

Experts Acknowledge Disappointing Outcomes

In the past, international experts on education and development generally believed that the most dramatic societal returns derived from universal *primary* education. Obtaining an average of four years of schooling was considered to represent:

> "an approximate takeoff point, a threshold of education in the workforce where increasing returns to scale for human capital begin to accrue. When this minimum average attainment was present, the quality of labor attains a critical mass allowing greater overall productivity."[10]

But there are signs that such a "takeoff point" may not be as valid for the Middle East as was believed. Instead, studies warn that:

Table 2. Average Comparative Educational Spending, 1960–2001

Country	Public spending on education as % of GDP
Bahrain	3.71
Algeria	6.59
Egypt	4.83
Iraq	4.46
Jordan	5.72
Kuwait	5.65
Lebanon	2.60
Libya	5.68
Morocco	5.42
Oman	4.60
Qatar	3.77
Saudi Arabia	6.47
Syria	6.04
Yemen	5.98
Combined average MENA	4.73
Combined low- and middle-income countries average	3.64
Combined world average	4.10

Source: World Bank, 2004, World Development Indicators

> "the expansion in education . . . did not result in higher productivity or more rapid growth. . . . This may be due to the low quality of education and to distortions in the labor market."[11]

Similarly, an IMF report concludes that productivity growth in the MENA region has generally been quite low by international standards. On first sight, the report notes, this is an anomaly in the face of significant improvements in the level of education:

> " . . . countries in the Middle East and North Africa . . . have made impressive strides since 1975. The average number of years of education completed by (individuals) 15 years of age and older in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Pakistan and Tunisia more than doubled between 1975 and 2000, compared with an average increase of only about 50 percent for other developing countries.
>
> "But contrary to expectations, the return in terms of productivity gains on this investment in education appears to have been relatively low. . . . Part of the reason may lie in a mismatch between the skills required in the modern job market and those provided by the education systems."[12]

In some instances, education even backfired on the young graduates. Disturbingly, some of the highest levels of unemployment in the Middle East are registered among those with more education[13]:

Educational reform should focus on civic values, national and global citizenship, and the constructive social engagement of youth.

> "Labor market surveys indicate that rising unemployment has hit mostly first time job seekers, particularly those with a secondary education. This suggests that unemployment is mainly a result of the countries' inability to create jobs fast enough to accommodate new entrants into the labor force . . . . It may also reflect the educational system's failure to provide its students with the kinds of skills needed for private sector jobs."[14]

Repeatedly, World Bank and other data underscored the failure of Middle Eastern economies to absorb their young adults, including those with an education:

> "Already half the region's young people find themselves without work, with youth making up a big chunk of the total unemployed, ranging from 37% in Morocco to 73% in Syria. *Most of the young unemployed have intermediate or advanced education and are on the lookout for a steady government job with benefits.*"[15] (Emphasis mine.)

Experts Focus on Pedagogy

Faced with discouraging outcomes, education experts declared a reformed pedagogy, better training of teachers, and improved curricula to be the newly identified keys to progress.

How plausible is this explanation? Given the continual and extensive involvement of international education experts in these programs from the start, it seems somewhat disingenuous for the experts now to discover suddenly that they had somehow overlooked such fundamental issues as teacher and teaching quality, of pedagogy, and of curriculum substance.

Middle Eastern governments and agencies, after all, did not just pluck their educational goals out of thin air; they relied on guidance from major international bodies. In 1990, for instance, the Conference on Education for All set an international goal of achieving universal primary education by 2000. The seductive promise at that time was that:

> "Education is development. It creates choices and opportunities for people, reduces the twin burdens of poverty and diseases, and gives a stronger voice in society. For nations it creates a dynamic workforce and well informed citizens able to compete and cooperate globally—opening doors to economic and social prosperity."[16]

The global assembly of development experts explicitly agreed that "primary completion rates" were "the best core indicator of an education system's

performance" because they measured "both the coverage of the education system and the educational attainment of students" and were thus an accurate "indicator of capital formation and the quality and efficiency of the school system."[17] A stellar assembly of world-class agencies, including the World Bank, the IMF, the OECD, and specialized UN agencies, all signed off on this formula, which was then unanimously adopted by the UN member states in the Millennium Declaration.

Meanwhile, a brief look at recent history informs us that issues of pedagogy are nothing new. Experts identified them as part of the region's socio-cultural problem decades ago. For example, in his 1988 analysis of what was wrong in the Arab world, the widely read scholar Bassam Tibi linked the problems in part to traditional pedagogy and warned that:

> "Problem-oriented thinking cannot be learned through raw memorization. Traditional education, which expends its energies not in creative thinking but in memorization and reproduction, cannot produce a functioning intellectual group able to pose problems, define them, analyze them and finally solve them."[18]

Before that, during the 1970s, social anthropologist Nancy Dupree singled out the Islamic/Middle Eastern pedagogic philosophy as one of the most significant causes of social stagnation. Here is her description of schooling in Afghanistan during that decade:

> "Rote memorization continued. Classrooms were teacher-centered, not child-centered. Teachers expounded, children listened, rarely posing questions, and seldom interacting in discussions. Remembering, not thinking, was important. Lessons were monotonous and boring, students passive and inattentive . . . the graduation of semi-functional literates to whom critical and analytic thinking was alien, were due largely to the rigidity of old curricula. In the rural areas, the question was: why waste time going to school when what I learn there is not relevant to my daily life? . . . There was little understanding that education should enhance interacting economic and social expectations."[19]

Even earlier, Arab reformers had identified the problem. Egyptian intellectual Muhammad Abduh only had to recall his own school days to remember spending "a year and a half without understanding a single thing, because of the harmful manner of this (i.e. traditional) method of teaching."[20]

At the beginning of the 20th century, the publications of reformer Mahmud Tarzi[21]—whose writings bore the influence of al-Afghani, Atatürk, and other intellectuals and reformers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—identified precisely the same reasons being put forward again today as explanations for the Middle East's backwardness. Education, Tarzi wrote, had languished. It was in the hands of sub-par, traditional-minded teachers. It neglected science. It produced apathy. Students were not learning to think analytically. Cultural activities were stifled. The society lacked freedom and even feared it. Women, Tarzi further believed, needed to be included in the education and reform effort and allowed to participate in the economy and public life. And the region was not sufficiently interlinked with the

rest of the world and its culture. It was not using its human or its natural resources to their best capacity.[22] Obviously, then, stultified pedagogy is not just the result of an accidental and recent oversight in planning. More must be at work.

If we take a step back and think more fundamentally about the role of education, an explanation suggests itself. Current programs often neglect the basic function of education as an agent of socialization. Certainly, education transmits knowledge, information, and skills. Beyond this, however, its function always has been to induct the next generation into a particular mindset and code of values, to make sure the young will turn out the way the older generation wants. The *madrassas* understand this. Classrooms teach reading and mathematics, but they also teach ways of behaving and thinking, reactions to disputes and problems, manners, and interactions. Modern skill sets do not add up to a modern individual. For example, teaching computer literacy is useful. However, if students do not receive a thorough grounding in civics, if they fail to develop a respect for human rights and the rule of law, and if there is no civil environment to shelter them when they leave the classroom, the teacher's efforts may be in vain or worse. The product of the classroom may simply be a competent and tech-savvy, but alienated and disgruntled individual who knows how to find bomb-making instructions on the World Wide Web.

A serious education reform effort must tackle two objectives. First, it should focus energetically on socialization. Second, it should address forcefully the disconnect between the educational system and the economy.

To a Westerner, modernity is so natural and self-evident that it may be easy to overlook the extent to which the ingredients and habits of a modern mindset are embedded in our own process of socialization. Western children learn from the first moment to categorize facts, understand scientific concepts, test the validity of hypotheses, and ask questions. From the sandbox on, they continuously receive instruction in colors and shapes, and in examples of cause and effect. Their toys and games encourage experimentation, curiosity, and problem solving. By contrast,

> "Questions dealing with non-routine problem-solving situations and other cognitive thinking skills yielded dire results among Arab students."[23]

This observation points to a basic deficit: A Middle Eastern education effort that begins with first grade is short-changing their next generation by starting too late.

If educational reform focuses on values, mind-sets, and building a positive identity, as I propose that it should, it needs to follow the same approach that worked in modern Western industrial democracies. That is, it needs to begin at the pre-school level and ideally should increasingly engage parents. This lays the foundation for critical and scientific thinking, tolerance, and the values needed in a healthy society. American children learn fact-based thinking as toddlers by following the blue paw-prints of a cartoon animal from fact to fact, "clue" to clue. They learn the concepts of

sharing, diversity, and compromise from programs such as Sesame Street.[24] Educational reform in the Muslim world should promote a thoughtful curriculum that focuses on civic values, national and global citizenship, and the constructive social engagement of youth.[25]

Middle East governments fear the threat to political stability if large numbers of young men are unable to find gainful occupation.

Second, educational reform in the Middle East must begin to deliver its promised outcomes. It should demonstrate that education leads not only to survival and sustenance, but beyond this to well-being and at least a modest prosperity.

Three prerequisites are necessary in order to achieve these goals. First, the classroom must teach skills that Middle Eastern youth will need to apply later in life. Second, work opportunities must be available when students graduate. Third, the young graduates must receive an education that makes them willing and able to perform that work.

In the Middle East, problems exist within each of these categories. In systems that suffer from nepotism and corruption, the privileged elite feel entitled to an elevated status with high prestige. Combined with the inefficient and stagnant economies in these regions, this blocks the successful application of human capital. In many areas of the Middle East, young men are unwilling to consider anything other than a guaranteed and comfortable government job. The service sector—including tourism, which is the best prospect for many countries—is considered demeaning and suitable only for foreigners. Young women are expected to retire into the domesticity of an arranged marriage immediately upon receiving their diploma, and family and clan connections are considered a more reliable pathway to employment than skills and qualifications. These societies do not place sufficient emphasis on merit, ambition, and accountability.

In diminishing the gap between education and employment, it is crucial to consider the specifics of the country and region and to tailor the curriculum accordingly. Too often, and with the best of intentions, generic and abstract programs and standards are introduced under the auspices of international advisers and consultants. In our visits to schools in post-Taliban Afghanistan, we found that children—having lived in refugee camps and other dislocated conditions—simply had no concept of vocations, professions and a functioning economy. The only jobs they could name were doctor, teacher, and pilot. Meanwhile, many of these children were in fact already economically active, and some were mainstays of their family's survival as de facto petty entrepreneurs in the bazaar. A post-conflict curriculum for their circumstances should have included civics and a carefully examined history as a building block of democratization and national reconciliation; health, hygiene, and landmine awareness; small business and life skills; and heavy emphasis on vocations and training. To bring small groups of Afghan teachers to the United States for exposure to modern pedagogy,

as is presently being done, is welcome and cannot hurt, but is not the most important method to emphasize.

Valuable Assets for Educational Reform

We have described some of the countervailing forces and incomplete paradigms standing in the way of change. But the reform effort also has valuable assets upon which to draw. Let us now turn to those things that are going well. We will highlight three in particular.

The first asset is the existence of a small group of Arab governments with both the foresight to see that change is necessary and the resources to do something about it. These governments view the situation in Saudi Arabia, where fiscal problems and a swollen aristocracy have caused increasing instability and extremism, as a wakeup call, an object lesson in what can happen if you rely on revenues from your natural resources and do not plan for the inevitable day when these will decline.[26] An entitlement mentality has caused "most young affluent Saudis to believe that they did not have to work, and if they did, that they need not apply themselves because they did not need to climb the corporate ladder. They would go straight from school to an executive suite."[27] It also led most urban Saudis to believe that they would, with no effort of their own, belong to that affluent class. Young Saudis' realization that government money is running out, and that their own future is uncertain, appears to be a major cause of that country's growing instability.[28]

Saudi Arabia is beginning to pay the price for its former profligacy, and other governments—notably the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar—have taken notice. These governments have understood the consequences of having a large group of idle, frustrated young adults:

> "The combination of young, educated and unemployed people is a potentially explosive problem often referred to as the 'human capital crisis.'"[29]

> "In high fertility states, where unemployment is high and radical political movements exist, large cohorts of youth from 18–24 years of age will be most directly affected by unemployment and will turn to radical political remedies."[30]

> "In the Arab and Muslim nations there are large numbers of angry young men with time on their hands."[31]

The above-named governments have instituted political reforms, albeit cautiously and to varying degrees, and they have begun to address seriously the nexus between their education and employment systems. They have sought to instill a stronger work ethic, encourage ambitiousness, create links between skill sets and employment, and encourage young graduates to venture into the private sector, both as employees and as new entrepreneurs. The Emirates have run public information campaigns to elevate the image of the service and tourism sectors, as well as developing training programs to support owners of fledgling small businesses. Qatar has embarked on a massive

revamping of its entire K-12 school system, establishing partnerships with major Western universities and colleges including Carnegie Mellon, Virginia Commonwealth University, Cornell Medical School, Texas A&M, and the College of the North Atlantic. It has embarked on an effort to restructure and reform its own national flagship institution, Qatar University, and is designing a scholarship and career counseling program.

These governments feel motivated on several levels to address the tenuous link between education and employment prospects. They fear the threat to political stability if large numbers of young men are unable to find gainful occupation.[32] They cannot afford to subsidize large segments of the population indefinitely, or to provide them with guaranteed government jobs. They also want to reduce the reliance on foreign workers by replacing them with nationals. (In several Gulf states, nationals represent only a quarter of the population. They are outnumbered by, and dependent on, foreign labor and expertise.)

Middle Eastern Women as a Force for Development

The Middle East's ambitious, high-achieving women are the second valuable asset. Arguably they are the most important. The extent to which they have forged ahead despite powerful social obstacles is this region's untold success story. See Table 3.

Young women in the Middle East/North Africa region are a strong human capital resource. Throughout the region, they show higher performance and more ambition than their male counterparts—as measured by exam results, school completion rates, and willingness to move into new job fields. In addition, they appear more eager to support and participate in societal change. This presumably reflects their assessment that current conditions do not favor them.

Young women in the Middle East/North Africa region are a strong human capital resource.

This trend is significant, and it is misleading to view young women as a footnote to development, as often happens in the literature. Rather, changes in the status and societal role of women have been an essential component of the successful transition to modernity and development wherever it has occurred. The status of women directly affects key areas linked to social advancement.

Female employment delays the age of marriage and child-bearing, which has several benefits. It improves the health of the mother and child, reducing public health care costs. It also lowers fertility rates and reduces the cost of welfare. Higher levels of female education, higher female employment, and a later age of marriage each contribute to smaller family sizes. The three states in the region with the highest birth rates—Yemen (7.2 births per woman), Palestine (5.9), and Saudi Arabia (5.7)[33]—are, not coincidentally, the very states where women have the lowest status and participate least in the economy.

Table 3. School Enrollment For Girls

	Girls as percentage of total enrolled, primary (1996)	Girls as percentage of total enrolled, secondary (1995)
Algeria	46	47.1
Bahrain	49	53.5
Egypt	45	46.1
Iran	47	45.4
Iraq	45	39.1
Jordan	49	50.3
Lebanon	32	52
Morocco	42	42
Oman	48	48
Saudi Arabia	48	46
Syria	47	45
Tunisia	47	47
Yemen	28	21

Source: World Bank Education Sector Strategy, 2004

Adding women to the workforce and reducing fertility rates both contribute to improved dependency ratios—that is, the proportion of wage earners to those who depend on them. This is crucial for prosperity. Studies have shown that gender parity in bureaucracies reduces corruption, a key obstacle to development throughout the Middle East.[34] Many of these effects are necessary preconditions for the "demographic transition."

The "education project" during the 1980s and 1990s included a strong focus on gender. When it began, female illiteracy rates and girls' enrollment rates lagged far behind those of males. National and international programs focused on redressing that imbalance—and in retrospect this may turn out to have been their most impressive and enduring legacy. A number of Middle Eastern countries achieved gender parity in education more quickly and more easily than anticipated. More surprisingly, females in some places are moving into the statistical lead:[35]

> "Once females (in the Middle East) gain access to education, they put it to use and succeed at much higher rates than boys do."[36]

Class repetition and dropout rates are generally higher for males. "Completion to grade five" is markedly higher for girls. Net enrollment rates today are slanted in favor of girls in more than half the Middle East/North Africa countries. At the secondary level, young women are ahead in two-thirds of these countries. Their advantage holds true for performance as well as presence:

> "Girls outperformed boys in two out of three subjects in Tunisia, Morocco and Lebanon, and in all subjects in Jordan and the Palestinian territories."[37]

In Kuwait, 77 percent of those who successfully passed the 2003 final secondary school exams were girls. They also won all of the top places in all subjects.[38] In 2001, 19 percent of Kuwaiti women, as compared to 15 percent of Kuwaiti men, had attained education beyond high school.[39]

The routinely higher performance of female pupils and students has led to some tacit and some explicit adjustments. In Saudi Arabia, in order to spare masculine pride, school officials no longer post exam results publicly. Bahrain has instituted a separate lower grading scale for males.[40] In Qatar, ceilings have been placed on the numbers of female students in some majors, including some branches of engineering. In Iran, quotas have been instituted in medicine to ensure places for male students versus the higher-achieving women.

Girls and young women clearly benefited from the significant amount of international attention, funding, and programs specifically aimed at improving their chances in school. Their gains also reflect increased support and interest from parents, educators, communities, and even from world public opinion. The reasons for their high motivation are no mystery. Young Arab women see education as their best chance to escape the tedium and powerlessness of their traditional alternative: lifelong disenfranchisement. They work hard because they still see school and learning as a novelty and a privilege of which they must prove themselves worthy.

Indeed, diligence in school has allowed women to achieve several more years of education, which amounts to more years of freedom. For some, this has led to employment and the enhanced status and autonomy that come from earning an independent wage and practicing a profession. It also has allowed them to delay childbearing, which in turn correlates with better health and greater longevity. In some places, an independent income also has earned young women a greater voice in the choice of a marriage partner.[41]

The growing acceptance of higher education for young women is raising the average age of marriage, as it becomes customary for young women to delay marriage until graduation. Primary education for daughters now receives broad acceptance across all social classes, with few exceptions.[42] Elite families are coming to see higher education as a suitable occupation for daughters prior to marriage.

Along with gains in education has come greater economic participation by women. Development experts point to low rates of female employment as one of the hallmarks of the socioeconomic stagnation in the Middle East.[43] But when one focuses not simply on the total numbers, but instead on trends, the picture changes quite dramatically, revealing steep gains by women.

In Kuwait, for example, only about 2 percent of women held jobs in 1965. By 2000, that number had climbed to 32 percent. Over half of Kuwaiti women between 25 and 44 years of age today are employed—about half in the health or education sectors, many of the remaining in clerical jobs.[44]

For an impressive snapshot of the progress that the current generation of young Arab women has made, one need only look to the UAE. In 1977, female students made up 37.6 percent of the student body in the Emirates. By 2002, that figure had grown to 76.8 percent. More astonishingly still, young women made up 44 percent of Emirati students studying abroad. This indicates that families are placing greater trust in young women's judgment, and it signals a significant shift in public opinion. Evidently, families perceive that the gains young women make from higher education and study abroad outweigh earlier considerations, such as the risk to a young woman's reputation caused by an unchaperoned stay abroad. This is a major shift reflecting the dynamism of the Persian Gulf states.[45]

In Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, women's educational gains still run into the dead end of tradition. Saudi women make up 58 percent of university graduates in that country, but only 22.4 percent of Saudi females above age 15 are economically active.[46] Unwillingness to allow them fuller access to the labor market makes them a "major and underutilized human resource."[47]

Intuitively we might suppose that, given the high youth unemployment rates in the Middle East, keeping at least the women out of the job market could ease the strain. Economists do not agree. Indeed, World Bank studies note that low female labor force participation is driving down GDP growth from a potential 2.6 percent to an actual 1.9 percent; that aggregate unemployment rates disprove the notion that women take jobs away from men; and that high dependency ratios (again, the proportion of wage earners to those who depend on them) place an enormous burden on Middle Eastern families and societies.[48] Not surprisingly, the countries that have sought to enhance meritocratic and entrepreneurial thinking in their populations are the same ones encouraging and giving space to the ambitions of their young women.

Some authors believe that the half-heartedness of Western policymakers in supporting the legal and social advancement of women in the Middle East has slowed progress in this domain. Bernard Lewis, for example, highlights the issue of women's marginalized and inferior status in Middle Eastern societies, and the West's lack of interest in addressing it, as one of the things that "went wrong" in the development of Muslim societies.[49]

Recommendations

A common error in Western public diplomacy, and perhaps also in development theory, is the notion that a troubled region must be tackled as a whole. Rather, it would make more sense to identify a limited number of locations where conditions are most suitable for successful reform efforts.

In some locations the effort faces so much obstruction, and the will for advancement is so lacking, that it is best to avoid wasting time and resources. The interior minister of Saudi Arabia may have expressed himself more bluntly than some of his anti-reformist colleagues in other Arab countries, but he undoubtedly spoke for many of them when he observed

that "we strongly believe in the correctness of our education system and its objectives. We don't change our system on the demands of others."[50]

Instead of flogging dead horses, international efforts should support those who show a willingness to change. These efforts should invest in promising groups and trends and focus on windows of opportunity. Besides the resource-rich states cited above, states that are undergoing nation-building, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, are important places to attempt reform. These are crucial arenas in which to apply the formula emerging from our experiences of the last decades: to provide socialization and identity support, to begin in a timely fashion with early childhood education, to structure the education system not according to abstract international standards but according to feasible economic links, to invest in cooperative and willing partners, and to support positive trends.

Notes

[1] For a brief overview of the concept of a demographic transition, including a discussion of whether it is applicable in the developing world, see Keith Montgomery, "The Demographic Transition," *http://www.uwmc.uwc.edu/geography/Demotrans/demtran.htm*.
[2] Ali Abdel Gadir Ali, *Building Human Capital for Economic Development in the Arab countries,* Arab Planning Institute, Kuwait, January 2002.
[3] World Bank, World Development Indicators 2002
[4] "Education in MENA," Sector Brief, World Bank, August 2003. Safa Faisal, "Muslim girls struggle for education," *BBC Arabic Service*, *http://www.newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk*.
[5] Sabeen Hassanali, *Education in the MENA region, A Progress Report and What Lies Ahead*, UN Millennium Project Task Force, March 2004.
[6] Aysit Tansel, Ayadim Gungor, "School Investment and Gender Gap in Schooling in the MENA Countries: An International Perspective," *www.ssrn.org*.
[7] See for example George Abed, Hamid Davoodi, "Challenges of Growth and Globalization in the Middle East and North Africa," IMF 2003; World Bank, "Middle East and North Africa Face Unprecedented Challenge," Development News Media Center, 26 September 2003.
[8] Ali Abdel Gadir Ali, "Building Human Capital for Economic Development in the Arab Countries," Arab Planning Institute, Kuwait, January 2002.
[9] UNDP 2002, Arab Human Development Report, 54.
[10] World Bank, "Education in the Middle East and North Africa, A Strategy Towards Learning for Development," Washington, 1998.
[11] M. El-Erian, T. Helbling, J. Page, "Education, Human Capital Development and Growth in the Arab Economies," paper, AMF-AFESD Seminar on Human Resource Development and Economic Growth, Abu Dhabi 1998, in Ali Abdel Gadir Ali, "Building Human Capital for Economic Development in the Arab Countries," Arab Planning Institute, Kuwait, 2002.
[12] Edward Gardner, Creating Employment in the Middle East and North Africa, IMF 2003
[13] Hassanali, op.cit., 13.
[14] Edward Gardner, "Creating Employment . . . " IMF 2003. In other locations, including Palestine and Iran, unemployment is especially high for college graduates.
[15] World Bank, "Middle East and North Africa Face Unprecedented Employment Challenge," 3 September 2003, *http://web.worldbank.org*.
[16] The World Bank Group, "Millennium Development Goals: Education," *www.developmentgoals.org/Education.htm*.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Bassam Tibi, *The Crisis of Modern Islam* (Salt Lake City, 1988). The title is more interesting in the original German: *Die Krise des modernen Islam, Eine vorindustrielle Kultur im wissenschaftlich-technischen Zeitalter* (*The crisis of modern Islam: A pre-industrial culture in an age of science and technology*), (Beck, Munich, 1981).

[19] Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Education Patterns in Afghanistan," *Refugee*, 17, no. 4 (1988): 17.
[20] In Nissim Rejwan, *Arabs Face the Modern World, Religious, Cultural and Political Responses to the West* (Gainesville, 1998): 13. Abduh lived from 1849–1905.
[21] Afghan reformer, 1866–1935.
[22] See Vertan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan, Politics of Reform and Modernization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).
[23] Hassanali, op.cit., 15.
[24] That this approach transfers without difficulty to Middle Eastern children is evidenced by the success of the program's regional franchises, including the very popular Egyptian version Alam Simsim. Statement of Educational Objectives for Alam Simsim Season II, The Children's Television Workshop, New York, NY.
[25] For guidelines on how this may be accomplished, we need only turn to Richard Lerner and his concept of Positive Youth Development, *www.rtc.pdx.edu/PDF/Conf05pp14.pdf*. See also Blasano, Adia, B. "The Role of Developmental Assets and Youth Engagement in Promoting Positive Development Among Youth," *Future For The Young: Options to Help Youth Escape the Trap of Radicalization*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, WR-354, March 2005.
[26] In Egypt, for example, from 1965 until 1990 graduates were guaranteed employment in the public sector. Qatar has recently announced its own abandonment of such a policy, but the expectation of a guaranteed government job after graduation lingers.
[27] Frank Viviano, "Kingdom on Edge: Saudi Arabia," *National Geographic* (October 2003): 2 ff.x
[28] Mai Yamani, "Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity," *I. B. Tauris* (October 2005.)
[29] Inder Sud, "Spurring Economic Growth in the Middle East: What Needs to be Done?" ME Forum, 6 September 2000, *www.meforum.org/pf.php?id=190*.
[30] Graham Fuller, *The Youth Factor: The New Demographics of the Middle East and the Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington: Brookings, 2003): 18.
[31] Alan Schwartz, "Getting at the Roots of Arab Poverty," *New York Times*, 1 December 2001.
[32] For young women, there is as yet no established link between unfilled free time and radicalization. Rather, on the basis of the admittedly sparse existing data, female suicide bombers appear so far to fit a different profile. Three correlations have been found: the desire to avenge a murdered relative; the desire to restore a personal reputation, often one which has been besmirched by some sexual misconduct on the part of the young woman, by a heroic act; and undue influence of a male relation or spouse on an unstable young woman.
[33] Data from 2002. Population Resource Center, *http://www.prcdc.org/summaries/middleeast/middleeast.html*.
[34] Roberta Gatti, David Dollar, and Raymond Fisman, "Are women really the 'fairer' sex : corruption and women in government," Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series No. 4, The World Bank, October 1999.
[35] This includes the Islamic Republic of Iran, where women now make up 60 percent of the student body at the tertiary level and where quotas in such disciplines as medicine are under discussion to secure places for males. See *http://www.parstimes.com/women/women_universities.html*.
[36] Sabeen Hassanali, "Education in the MENA Region: A Progress Report and What Lies Ahead," 20 March 2004.
[37] "Towards a New Agenda for Children," UNICEF 2001.
[38] Amir Taheri, "Women in Kuwait," 16 July 16, *http://www.townhall.com/columnists/GuestColumns/Taheri20030716.shtml*.
[39] Nara Shah, "Women's Socioeconomic Characteristics and Marital Patterns in a Rapidly Developing Muslim Society, Kuwait," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 35 (Spring 2004): 164.
[40] Personal communication, Jehan Bahmdain, Jeddah, August 2003; and Hassanali, op.cit. 18.
[41] Prem Saxena, Andrzej Kulczycki, Rosset Jurdi, "Nuptiality Transition and Marriage Squeeze in Lebanon," *Journal of Comparative Marriage Studies* 35 (Spring 2004): 241.

[42] The greatest regional, urban-rural, and class differences are evident at the level of secondary education, which continues to be viewed by some families as too dangerous (because it usually involves longer travel to school and more potential interaction with males) and as unnecessary.

[43] "While more women are getting employed, they remain vulnerable, reflecting limited opportunities and restrictions on their role in the public sphere. Unemployment rates for the region as a whole are nearly 50 percent higher for women than for men." World Bank, September 2003. See also World Bank, "Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa," Washington, D.C., 2003 and especially Mustapha Nabli, "Jobs, Growth and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa," MENA Development Reports, World Bank 2003.

[44] Nasra Shah, op.cit., 165.

[45] Caren Nelson, "UAE National Women at Work in the Private Sector, Conditions and Constraints," Center for Labor Market Research and Information, United Arab Emirates Ministry of Information and Culture, Dubai 2005, *http://www.zu.ac.ae/infoasis/modules/mod8/Business/documents/UAEnationalwomenatworkintheprivatesector.pdf* (as of May 2006).

[46] UNDP statistics for 2003, *http://gender.pogar.org/countries/morestats.asp?cid=16&ind=18#notes*.

[47] Mona AlMunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Roula Baki, "Gender Segregated Education in Saudi Arabia: Its Impact on Social Norms and the Saudi Labor Market," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 12, 28 June 2004, *http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v12n28*.

[48] Nadereh Chamlou, "Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa," The World Bank, briefing prepared for the Woodrow Wilson Center, 30 January 2004.

[49] Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002): 68, 69.

[50] Quoted in Andrew Coulson, "Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World. Is There a Problem? What Can we Do About It?" *Policy Analysis* 511 (11 March 2004): 10.