

**Forum:** Arab League

**Issue:** Promoting forms of higher education for underdeveloped communities in the Arab world

**Student Officer:** Zaina Fatma Khan

**Position:** Deputy Chair

---

## Introduction

Education is a fundamental and a crucial factor in the development and wellbeing of individuals and societies. In the Arab world, education is considered to be the most effective tool for advancing society. However, reports indicate that there are several issues with the educational system in the region. For example, 56% of Arab primary education students and 48% of lower secondary pupils are not learning foundational skills such as expression of ideas, problem solving, critical thinking, phonological awareness, communication and collaboration in school. Additionally, there does not seem to be much consideration for ways to enrol those who are not currently in school or ensure proper education and educational facilities for millions of refugees and displaced Arab children and youth.

Education is important yet not the only one of the many challenges faced by the underdeveloped communities of the Arab world. The term "underdeveloped communities" refers to areas that are lacking in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and overall socioeconomic development. Some other challenges such as unemployment and poverty, healthcare challenges, political instability, and conflict also add to the list of difficulties.

Despite these, education can help reduce poverty by providing knowledge and skills that enable people to earn more money. It generates income through increased

productivity, participation in the labour force, and entrepreneurship. Education can also help reduce gender inequality by empowering women and girls with knowledge and skills that enable them to participate in the workforce and secure higher-paying, skilled employment. Furthermore, it can help improve health outcomes across nations by providing people with knowledge about healthy living practices and disease prevention which will transform all the underdeveloped communities to developed ones.

According to a report by Global Citizen, children living in poverty face many barriers to accessing education, some of which are lack of funding, language barriers, gender roles, lack of infrastructure, conflict, and instability. It is important to note that promoting education is a long-term process that requires sustained investment and commitment from governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders. Education is not a panacea for all the problems faced by underdeveloped communities. However, it is a critical component of any strategy aimed at development.

## **Key Issues**

### **Quality and Access**

Many universities in the Arab world lack the resources and infrastructure to provide quality education that meets the demands of a rapidly advancing world. The education they provide often does not meet the needs of students, employers, and society at large. While there has been considerable progress towards universal access to school, there are disparities in enrolment and attainment. For instance, university graduates are less likely to be employed than their peers who have only completed primary or secondary school.

### **Systemic and Governance Issues**

Education systems throughout the region are hindered by low quality, irrelevancy, and inequity. Despite governments allocating a significant portion of their national

income to education, there has been a very low return on investment in terms of meaningful educational outcomes. Developmental deficits — e.g., in health, education, and culture — are attributed to failures of governance, stemming from the ability of rulers to buy loyalty from the opposition in exchange for economic privilege and social security.

### **Economic Challenges**

The lack of employment opportunities forced millions of people to turn to the informal economy, where workers typically earn low pay, have unstable incomes, and lack basic social protections. Many universities in the Arab world suffer from a lack of funding, which can limit their ability to provide quality education and conduct research.

### **Language Barriers**

Many universities in the Arab world use Arabic as the primary language of instruction, which can limit access to higher education for non-Arabic speakers. Many institutions in the Arab region have adopted English as the medium of instruction. However, this can create a linguistic tension, especially for students with low proficiency in English. The transition from Arabic-medium education in public schools to English-medium instruction in tertiary education can be challenging. The use of foreign languages as mediums of instruction might lead to a loss of cultural and national identity. It could also result in the depletion of the linguistic capital of the nation.

### **Political Instability and Lack of Collaboration**

Political instability and conflict can disrupt higher education systems and limit access to education for students. There is often a lack of collaboration between universities and industry in the Arab world, which can limit opportunities for students to gain practical experience and develop skills that are relevant to the job market.

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

### Egypt

Higher education institutions in Egypt have been driving the country's human capital development, economic growth, and prosperity. Universities prepare students with the skills demanded by the private sector and conduct research that solves market and development challenges. Over the past four decades, USAID has provided scholarships to more than 4,000 Egyptians to study at premier Egyptian and American universities in fields critical to Egypt's sustained economic growth and development. USAID has pioneered the concept of career guidance and counselling for public university scholars and graduates for the first time in Egypt. Facilitating student transitions from education to employment through deliberate engagement with the private sector will help a new generation of Egyptians parlay their academic studies into meaningful employment, cutting-edge research, and future leadership roles at Egypt's leading companies.

### Libya

The idea of cooperation among Arab universities first came out during a seminar held in Benghazi, Libya in 1964. Over the past few decades, the higher education system in Libya has witnessed a rapid growth in student numbers and a massive expansion in its programs and services. Libya has received support from the European Union to promote active citizenship, participation in political and social affairs, and socioeconomic integration of the young population. This includes promoting economic development and socioeconomic integration of Libyan youth, supporting better access to quality education for Libyan children, and promoting informal education and cultural activities.

### Gulf Arab States

Over the past two decades, the Gulf states have experienced a "higher education boom" in terms of the quantity and quality of institutions and programs now available.

They have imported a Western, largely American, model of higher education to address inefficiencies in labour markets and invest in their economic futures. Nearly 60 colleges or universities have been founded in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Oman by provincial governments, nation-states, private organisations and individuals. This includes American-style institutions, turnkey institutions, branch campuses, or a full-fledged replica liberal arts campus. The Gulf states have shown foresight, agency, and political will on the part of individual national leaders to plan for a knowledge-based future by investing in tertiary education today.

## **Algeria**

Over the past few decades, the higher education system in Algeria has witnessed a rapid growth in student numbers and a massive expansion in its programs and services. The Algerian higher education system features more than 1.5 million students, out of whom about 300,000 are pursuing a Master's degree and about 55,000 are registered as doctoral candidates. About 30% of universities and 90% of university centres have been created since 2000. These institutions aim to train the national elite, often with employment guaranteed in various public administrations upon graduation in their respective field. As of 2019, the Algerian higher education system features 26 national research units at universities and 25 research centres under the tutelage of MESRS and seven other Ministries, as well as more than 1,500 groups (laboratories) at universities.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia has recognized the necessity of developing its university system to world-class standard and significantly increasing access to and participation in higher education across a range of traditional and non-traditional disciplines<sup>1</sup>. This includes overhauling curricula and raising education standards nationwide. Over the past four decades, USAID has provided scholarships to more than 4,000 Egyptians to study at premier Egyptian and American universities in fields critical to Egypt's sustained economic growth and development. The University Centers for Career Development,

established by USAID in coordination with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, offer career mentoring, employability skills, English language training, and connections to jobs to university students throughout Egypt. In 2021, former minister of education Tarek Shawki said that Egypt needed LE130 billion in investments to build 250,000 fresh classrooms to address overloaded capacity.

## **Europe**

The hosting of Euro Arab Countries has led to the collaboration of the European University Association (EUA) and the Association of Arab Universities (AARU). The conference hosted around 220 participants in total including representatives from 19 Arab countries and 19 European countries. It touched upon many areas including descriptions of the current developments and future possibilities in the areas of internationalisation, comparability of educational systems, research, doctoral education, and employability. During this conference it was announced that in the new EU mobility programme there would be opportunities for funding and that the Commission is interested in following the developments in the cooperation between Europe and the Arab region. UNESCO, based in Paris, France, has been promoting global citizenship education in Arab universities. This initiative aims to bring back the old culture of education that once was in the Arab world.

## **United States**

The US has been involved in promoting higher education in the Arab world through various initiatives, including the establishment of American university branches in Arab countries. The US also pledged \$305 million to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) for 2021. The U.S. has provided scholarships to more than 4,000 Egyptians to study at premier Egyptian and American universities in fields critical to Egypt's sustained economic growth and development. The U.S. has partnered with educators, specialists, and public sector officials from the United States and the Middle

East to review the current state of higher education in the Arab world and consider the key challenges facing this critical sector of society.

**Development of Issue/Timeline**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century BC to 13<sup>th</sup> century AD</b>	Education in the developed era of Arab communities	The Arabic-Islamic Golden Age is a period of remarkable scientific, medical, and cultural achievements in the Arab-Muslim world. During this period, education thrived in the Arab world. Scientific progresses were done and the factors that assisted this progress were The Quran’s encouragement of knowledge, the Arabic language as a unifying factor, the translations of ancient manuscripts, the communication and collaboration among scholars, and the establishment of libraries and academic institutions. Medical advancements were done such as development of anatomy, surgery, pharmacology, and various medical specialties, based on the synthesis and elaboration of ancient knowledge and personal experience. A well defined system of medical education and

		<p>secular hospitals were created. The Arab scholars also contributed to astronomy, mathematics, chemistry, and other disciplines that influenced mediaeval and modern science. The inventions of irrigation methods, windmills, and waterwheels, and the architectural and artistic wonders of the Arab world were a contribution to technological and artistic achievements.</p>
<p><b>13<sup>th</sup> century to 16<sup>th</sup> century</b></p>	<p>Decline of Abbasid Empire, European colonisation, geopolitical ambitions and interference.</p>	<p>This was the declining period of the developed era. The decline of the Golden Age likely affected the quality and accessibility of education. Disruption in the educational and cultural systems due to colonialism and political instability. The focus was shifted from the philosophical and natural sciences. As the British and French took control of the region, they inherited lands with largely impoverished populations. This colonial legacy might have disrupted traditional educational systems and practices.</p>



<p><b>Present Day</b></p>	<p>Relevance of education</p>	<p>Many Arab youth spend years in school but fail to receive a quality education. The education they receive often does not meet the demands of a rapidly advancing world. While there has been considerable progress towards universal access to school, there are disparities in enrolment and attainment. Despite governments allocating a massive portion of their national income to education, there has been an exceptionally low return on investment in terms of meaningful educational outcomes. While the value placed on education has remained consistent from the developed period to the present day, the challenges faced by the education sector in Arab communities have evolved significantly.</p>
---------------------------	-------------------------------	---

**Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

**By Arab countries**

There have been several initiatives to promote higher education in underdeveloped Arab communities, some of which are:

**Middle East Green Initiative:**

This initiative, launched by Saudi Arabia on October 25 in the year 2021, aims to transition regional economies away from unsustainable development and towards

a model that is fit for the challenges of the 21st century. The initiative's focus on sustainability and climate change mitigation opens up new avenues for research. Universities and research institutions in the region have benefitted from this focus, leading to advancements in academic research and innovation.

#### **Education Reform:**

Many Arab countries have launched education reform initiatives such as Literacy Challenge in the Arab World and MENA Workforce Development Initiative aimed at improving the quality and relevance of education.

#### **Scholarship Programs:**

Several universities in the Arab world offer scholarship programs to students from underprivileged backgrounds, which can help increase access to higher education.

### **By United Nations**

The United Nations has several initiatives aimed at addressing the challenges faced by underdeveloped Arab communities.

One of the most recent initiatives is the Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States. This convention was adopted by Member States belonging to UNESCO's Arab region on February 2, 2022, during an International Conference of States at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France. The convention aims to facilitate student mobility and cooperation among higher education systems in the Arab States region.

UNESCO also serves as the Secretariat to the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education as well as five complementary regional recognition conventions. These conventions cover recognition and mobility in each region, while the Global Convention facilitates this between regions.

In addition to these conventions, UNESCO is working to promote education in underdeveloped Arab communities through initiatives such as teacher training programs, curriculum development, and support for research and innovation. UNESCO is also working to promote sustainable development in the Arab region through initiatives such as economic diversification, investment in infrastructure, and regional cooperation.

## **Possible Solutions**

### **Investment in Education**

Governments and international organisations can invest more in education to improve the quality and relevance of education. This can include increasing funding for schools, universities, and research institutions.

### **Teacher Training Programs**

Teacher training programs can help improve the quality of education by providing teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to be effective educators. This can include training in new teaching methods, technology, and curriculum development.

### **Curriculum Development**

Curriculum development can help ensure that students are learning the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the modern global economy. This can include developing new courses and programs that are relevant to the job market, as well as updating existing courses to reflect changes in technology and industry.

## **Bibliography**

Lapidus, I. M. (n.d.). *Decline and fall of the Abbasid empire (Chapter 10) - Islamic societies to the nineteenth century*. Cambridge Core.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/islamic-societies-to-the-nineteenth-century/decline-and-fall-of-the-abbasid-empire/C8D6E17AC1BBE621F1064206E7AE6989>

Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.). *Umayyad dynasty*. Encyclopædia Britannica.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history>

Ali, M. (n.d.). *Introduction - islam and colonialism*. Cambridge Core.  
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/islam-and-colonialism/introduction/5CFA6BE5963705B666E201C946AB1FA1>

Arab Center Washington DC. (2022, November 9). *The colonial legacy in the Arab World: Health, education, and politics*.  
<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-colonial-legacy-in-the-arab-world-health-education-and-politics/>

George Ingram, B. J., & Li, C. (2016, July 28). *Higher Education Reform in the Arab world*. Brookings.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/higher-education-reform-in-the-arab-world/>

Guardian News and Media. (2011, December 19). *The “arab spring” and the west: Seven lessons from history | seumas milne*. The Guardian.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/dec/19/arab-spring-seven-lessons-from-history>

Hasan, S. (1970, January 1). *European colonization and the Muslim majority countries: Antecedents, approaches, and impacts*. SpringerLink.  
[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-007-2633-8\\_7](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-007-2633-8_7)

*Higher education in the Arab World: Government and governance*. UNESCO.org. (n.d.).  
<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/higher-education-arab-world-government-and-governance>

*Overview*. World Bank. (n.d.). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/overview>

*Pre Colonial Political Systems*. obo. (n.d.).

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/abstract/document/obo-9780199846733/obo-9780199846733-0100.xml>

The rise and fall of Islamic empires: A comprehensive overview. (n.d.).

<https://thedigitalislam.com/islamic-empires/>

*Why education is the key to development*. World Economic Forum. (n.d.).

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/07/why-education-is-the-key-to-development/>

Yahya, M. (2023, January 23). *The Middle East's lost decades*. Foreign Affairs.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/middle-east-s-lost-decades>