

A Special Focus: Aspects of Higher Education in the Arab States

To return home bearing this knowledge was surely a greater feat than any mechanical instrument, no matter how strategically useful. In this way the course of his life signified not gradual progression but a tool of change. If he could carry this knowledge, and set the evidence clearly before the wisest minds in the Sultan's court, then he would be rewarded beyond any man's dreams, but more than that, his name would be inscribed in the books of history as the man who has shed another fragment of light into the darkened cave of man's ignorance. Surely this would be an achievement greater than any reward? On the other hand, they might just call him an apostate and slice off his head.

—Jamal Mahjoub, *The Carrier*

Since the groundbreaking monographs of J.-J. Waardenburg and F. I. Qubain, both published in 1966, the case of higher education in the Arab states has been largely neglected in the broader literature on higher education.¹ The bulk of the research, commissioned by international and regional bodies, tends to be policy driven and based on human capital and managerial approaches. Few systematic or long-range efforts have been undertaken to probe the sociopolitical and economic underpinnings of higher education operation and expansion. Nor did such efforts address the contested terrains of higher education and the extent to which expansion has mediated mounting dissent and sociopolitical conflicts, affecting both the broader class structure as well as the internal stratification of elite groups.

The expansion of contemporary Arab higher education is heavily associated with the emergence of Arab state systems. Such an association was not devoid of inherent contradictions. Among other things, the expansion of public higher education meant the marginalization, if not actual expropriation and appropriation by the state, of community-based patterns of education organized around

and related to religious institutions, such as university mosques and other religious institutions of higher learning. It also meant the imposition of a paradigmatic alternative, namely: a uniform, state-controlled public system. Such a transformation is not merely “modernization,” “structural change,” or “transition.” Rather, it expresses a more basic, often radical, and certainly conflict-loaded transformation of the existing social bases of power; the determination of new sources of authority (both political and social); and the definition of what valid (and therefore politically connoted) knowledge is.

Notwithstanding, within Arab societies, the current debate on higher education has taken on increasingly critical overtones since the late 1980s. The established meanings of an Arab university, and of higher education in general, are being adamantly challenged socially, politically, and economically. As the globalization process extends to all levels, and privatization is on the rise, the very definition of a “national university” has become ambiguous. And yet, the increasing share of the private sector and the gradual retreat of the state raise many questions as to what higher education should achieve, what knowledge should it impart, and what politics should it follow.

The five contributions in this thematic section provide selective illustrations of some of the issues at stake.

—André Elias Mazawi

Notes

The source for the epigraph is Jamal Mahjoub, *The Carrier* (London: Phoenix House, 1998), 244.

1. J.-J. Waardenburg, *Les universités dans le monde arabe actuel*, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1966); F. I. Qubain, *Education and Science in the Arab World* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

Higher Education in Yemen: Knowledge and Power Revisited

Gabriele vom Bruck

Gabriele vom Bruck is a research fellow in the Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. Address: Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. E-mail: <g.vom-bruck@lse.ac.uk >.

The educational reforms implemented by the Ottomans during their second occupation of Yemen (1849–1918) set the scene for gradual, profound changes in the education system. The introduction of the printing press in 1877, among other factors, precipitated bureaucratization and changes in the attitudes toward knowledge. Seeking to es-

tablish a centralized state after the departure of the Ottomans, Imam Yahya (1904–1948), the supreme leader of the Zaydi-Shii Imamate, maintained those features of the Ottoman reforms that fostered systematization of education. Newspapers and books were printed, and a history committee was set up to construct a “unified” Yemeni history.¹ The Imam took over the Ottoman military academy, and in the late 1920s and mid-1930s students were sent for training as pilots to Rome and to the military college in Baghdad. In 1946, 5 students, all members of learned families, were sent to the *Mahad Ali*, a diplomatic school in Cairo. A year