

Many Arab Professors Lose Interest in Academia

Rasha Faek

Abstract

A recent study by *Al-Fanar Media* found that many professors in the Middle East are discouraged by work conditions at universities and the lack of independent bodies to defend their rights.

University professors in Arab countries have long complained about poor wages, but recent interviews and research also found widespread dissatisfaction with other work conditions, such as lack of basic benefits and short-term contracts that make their livelihoods precarious. Many are also discouraged by the absence of independent faculty unions to defend their rights.

Interviews with 75 professors at public and private universities in 11 countries (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates) reveal that because of these conditions—and the failure of governments and universities to address them—some regret having chosen an academic career. It is also a cause of exodus of academic talent from the region.

While professors at private universities often have good salaries compared to their counterparts in public universities, many still say they do not receive basic benefits such as social or health insurance, and work under contracts that specify their teaching tasks and their pay, but without any other allowances.

Many professors lack basic job security because they work under contracts that university administrations can terminate without prior notice and without paying compensation. Moreover, public universities, which usually pay lower wages, have recently started discontinuing temporary contracts with many professors, due to the urgency of calls to hire more faculty members and the lack of necessary funding. As a result, many professors work today with low salaries and without benefits.

Negative Effects on Teaching

“The lack of job benefits negatively affects our academic work, especially in light of our overcrowded classrooms,” says Jemil El-Hadjarin, a professor at Manouba University in Tunisia. “We feel we are treated unjustly and try to compensate for that by overtime work in other professions most of the time. Some of us may give up teaching altogether or emigrate to work in another country.”

A university professor in Jordan, who switched from working in a private university to business, agrees with El-Hadjarin. “My father and uncles are all university professors,” he said, “yet today I regret choosing such a career, which no longer has the same social status or job benefits. University professors do not have any real job benefits, and they are vulnerable to violence by students amid the lack of an institution that protects and defends them,” he says.

The situation is not that different in many other Arab countries, where, according to the interviewees, the majority of employment contracts at private universities adopt the “agreements must be kept” principle, whereby universities specify the tasks of professors in exchange for material remuneration, without any health and social insurance benefits, or allowances for travel or research.

In Kuwait, “a public university professor is ultimately protected by the same regulations protecting any public civil servant,” said Ibrahim Al-Hmoud, president of the Kuwait University Faculty Association. “Those working in private universities have much less job guarantees than those working in a public university,” a condition which the faculty association believes “requires expediting the development of legislation that provides greater protection for faculty members.”

Lack of Job Protection

Copies of contracts obtained by *Al-Fanar Media* reveal that most private universities hire instructors on short-term work contracts that may include just one renewable semester, and administrators have absolute authority to terminate the contract at any time.

"I think that the lack of long-term contracts makes professors live in a state of psychological instability because they are likely to have to leave at any time," says Mazhar El-Shorbagy, an assistant professor of philosophy at Deraya University in Egypt's Minya Governorate.

Omar Draider, a professor in the Petroleum Engineering Department at Libya's Al-Rifaq University, in Tripoli, Libya, agrees with El-Shorbagy about the negative impact of the type of contracts common at private universities. "Despite our good wages, we are threatened with the prospect of being dismissed at any time, this threatens any professor or scholar's job stability."

In Sudan, universities come under "the same law applied to private companies, enabling them to dispense with any employee at any time," says Khaled Hassan, an assistant professor with the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Garden City, a public institution in Khartoum. He points out that he previously worked in a private university that expelled professors and did not allow them to reenter university buildings, even to collect their personal belongings from their offices.

Meanwhile, public university contracts seem more equitable, as professors are often hired under the general labor law applied to all public jobs, or the university employment law, under which professors receive social insurance and sometimes health insurance, if there is a health insurance system in the country. Contracts also sometimes include other compensations and a pension upon termination of service.

Weak Union Support

In many Arab countries, there are no unions or other advocacy entities that include university professors and defend their rights. None of the countries in the study have unions for professors at private universities. In Sudan, university professors are seeking to form a single general union of representatives of faculty unions at each university, with the aim of uniting their efforts to become a more influential entity. Nevertheless, efforts to form unions are not always successful. This is the case in Jordan. "Rights are usually protected by professional associations," says Suleiman Al-Olaimat, a faculty member at Jordan University of Science and Technology. "Several attempts have been made to establish a union of university professors including public and private university professors," he says, "but unfortunately, all attempts reached a dead end."

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Poor Work Environment

The problems of university professors are not limited to work contracts or the lack of supportive bodies. They face other problems, such as lack of external and internal training opportunities, work compensation, and the provision of housing and transportation for employees from far away cities or areas. Universities do not provide professors with free computers or internet services on campus.

Some interviewees also point out an absence of incentives for scientific research and unjust procedures for promotion. "Academic work has become a burden on university professors," says an Algerian university professor. "There are no incentives to work. This leads to a lack of passion and has turned teaching into a difficult profession."

The negative consequences of the lack of job benefits do not only affect professors, but the entire educational process, as many professors stop working and seek opportunities abroad, which causes a great loss of human resources. Mamdouh Taj, an assistant professor at the library department at Omdurman Islamic University in Sudan, says: "The results are catastrophic for Sudanese universities, with an estimation of about 13,000 qualified professors who emigrated in recent years to the Arab Gulf states and Europe. [...] The lack of interest in improving the status of professors [is] reflected in a lower quality of university education and the levels of graduates alike." ▲

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