Governance of Higher Education in the Arab World and the Case of Tunisia

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Public universities in the Arab world have suffered from what might be called a political model of governance. This model involves the subordination of universities to political influence, from top to bottom as well as horizontally. It leads to the closing of minds, the undermining of knowledge production, and a limited ability of universities to bring about social change. The exception to this dominant model in the Arab world is Tunisia, which, not coincidentally, has also been the only exception to the failure of the “Arab Spring,” continuing on the path of democracy and progressive reform despite some setbacks.

The Political Model

An edited volume recently published in Beirut recounts the historical development of 10 Arab public universities—the oldest in each country—from their inception until 2016. It shows that the typical Arab public university fell under a political model of governance, mostly in the 1970s, moving away from the Napoleonic model used previously. This Napoleonic model references the French system established by Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), in which higher education is centralized (state oriented), secular, and provided in distinct professionally and academically oriented schools apart from research institutes (which are also centralized).

For example, in 1977, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat issued a law prohibiting political activity at Egyptian universities. Based on this law, security agents began setting up checkpoints at the entrances of university buildings and intervening in university decisions. In fact, Sadat revived the strong legacy of control familiar in the Nasser era (1953–1970) while, paradoxically, adopting a liberal economic policy and new openness to the West and Israel in foreign policy. To fight the continuing political influence of Nasserism inside universities, Sadat relied on conservative Islamic forces, including both faculty and students. The same approach continued under the next president, Hosni Mubarak, who held power until 2011. Indeed, Egyptian universities remain the topic of many reports on academic freedom violations by Human Rights Watch. During the same
The political model of governance is likely to transform

The Tunisian exception

Public universities in Tunisia appear atypical. They remain closer to the Napoleonic model. Unlike the Syrian Ba’ath Party, the Tunisian ruling political party, the Constitutional Liberal Party (Destour) is no ideological party; it is an elite party with a popular base. It incorporates members from a variety of intellectual backgrounds, including leftists; indeed, former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali appointed a member of the left, Mohamed Charfi, as minister of education (1989–1994).

The differences between the Tunisian case and others in the region are significant enough to be explanatory regarding the varied outcomes of the so-called Arab Spring. The first difference concerns intellectual openness. The University of Tunis was, and remains, open to the French university system in its curricula, organization, and intellectual resources. French books, newspapers, television, and other media are part of Tunisian culture and university life, even influencing the Islamic Ennahda Party. The second difference relates to the selection of university leadership. An election system was introduced by law in 2011 and consolidated afterwards—unlike in Egypt, where it was legislated following the 2011 revolution, but subsequently annulled. The third difference is the legacy of syndicalism. A union for higher education and scientific research was established in 1967 and joined the Tunisian Labor Union, which had been in existence since 1946, preceding the country’s independence from French rule in 1956. The Higher Education Union expanded in the 1980s, as a reaction to the shift toward economic liberalization in the country.

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Forced Internationalization of Higher Education: An Emerging Phenomenon

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Today’s world is faced with a severe forced migration crisis. The recent Annual Global Trends Report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicates that a person becomes a forced migrant every two seconds. The current number of forced migrants worldwide is 68.5 million. These forced migrants include established scholars as well as undergraduate and graduate students whose education has been interrupted by forces outside of their control. They are knocking on the doors of universities in different parts of the world. Some are being heard, others are being ignored. Universities and governments should remember how significantly forced immigrant scholars and students have contributed to national research and development and institutional quality in the past, including, for example, Jewish scholars who fled to the United States from Nazi Germany.

A recent report by the UNHCR, Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis, reveals that the ratio of refugee youth studying at a university is 1 percent, which is far lower than the global enrollment rate in higher education of 36 percent. It is extremely disappointing that national governments and individual institutions have not acted more quickly to assist the large mass of displaced people in accessing education—in line with Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—thereby recognizing this as a human right. There have been some promising efforts, but these efforts have not been evenly spread across the developed and the developing world. According to the Annual Global Trends Report of the UNHCR, 85 percent of the refugees under the UNHCR’s mandate, who have been forcibly displaced as a result of conflict, violence, or persecution, are hosted by countries in the developing world. The challenges faced by these countries in responding to a global problem on their doorstep requires further attention, as the case of Turkey illustrates.

Syrian Refugees in Turkish Universities

Currently, Turkey hosts over 3.6 million Syrian refugees, the highest number hosted by any country. As the war in Syria is ongoing, and assuming therefore that it will host Syrian refugees for a long time, the Turkish government has repositioned itself by strategically internationalizing three functions of Turkish universities.

In order to help Syrian refugees access universities as students, the Turkish government has reformed academic and financial admission policies. Universities have been required to admit Syrian refugees without proof of previous academic qualification as “special students,” and those who do have proof as “regular students.” In addition, Arabic-taught programs have been established at eight universities in southern Turkey, close to the Syrian border. Financial policies have been changed to provide Syrian refugees with government scholarships and exemption from tuition fees paid by other international students. The result has been a dramatic increase in the number of Syrian students enrolled in Turkish universities, from 608 in 2011 to 20,701 in 2018, as reported by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE).

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The strategic internationalization efforts of the Turkish government have also targeted potential academics among Syrian refugees. In 2016, an online platform, the Database for International Academics, was established to collect curricula vitae. This resulted in increased numbers of Syrian academics working in Turkey. According to the CoHE, the number of full-time Syrian academics has increased from 292 to 348 in the last three years. In addition, in the same period, masters and doctoral programs admitted 1,492 and 404 Syrian refugees respectively.