

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

later 40 students of different social backgrounds were sent to Lebanon at the expense of the Lebanese government. Previously, some members of privileged families completed their education at religious colleges in Cairo and Mecca; some men of the Hadramawt went to India. In contrast, those who went abroad in the first half of the 20th century received army training and a secular education.

In 1926, the Imam established the Madrasah al-Ilmiyyah, an institution dedicated to the training of senior government officials who were to possess expertise in the religious sciences. The style of teaching differed from that practiced at the mosques. The Madrasah was dedicated to producing administrators rather than *Mujtahids* (scholars entitled to pronounce independent judgment). Endowments were sequestered from local teaching institutions to the Treasury, which financed the new Madrasah. This constituted another innovation that led to the bureaucratization and curtailment of the authority of the *Ulama* (religious scholars). They had previously been allowed to administer the income from mosque endowments in the rural religious enclaves (*Hijar*).

In the 1930s and 1940s Imam Yahya faced criticism from those *Ulama* who had lost their autonomy and opposed his creation of a patrimonial state, as well as others (among them men of letters) who shared their concerns and favored profound political and educational reforms that the Imam was unwilling to implement. They demanded the introduction of a parliament, a constitution, freedom of speech, and access to knowledge that was available in Arab and European countries. Arabic translations of European literature were brought from Aden, and some reformist scholars began promoting the ideas of the Renaissance.

Imam Yahya's son, Ahmad (1948–1962), introduced schools for girls and intermediate and secondary schools in the major towns, where English and geography was taught by Egyptian and Palestinian teachers. However, demands for further reforms continued to be made. The students who completed their higher education abroad returned to Yemen with high expectations. The Imam disapproved of their nationalist ideologies and refused to assign them to senior posts.

Thus in the early and mid-20th century, the trajectories of the lives of the learned elite were shaped by intralite disputes about the nature of knowledge and political authority rather than by European colonial rule. Demands for reforms accompanied by political violence in the late 1940s helped to destabilize the Imamate, one of the last bastions of Hashimite power in the 20th century. By contributing to undermining the state they wished to reform rather than to obliterate, the elite ultimately undermined themselves.

#### *Knowledge Production under the Republic*

The new elite of the republic is made up of the army, tribal leaders, technocrats, and merchants. In the immediate af-

termath of the revolution, their ranks were filled by those men who had been sent abroad by the Imams. For example, Ali bin Sayf al-Khawlani, who studied in Lebanon, became chief of staff of the armed forces in 1968 and minister of the interior in 1970; Muhsin al-Ayni, a former pupil of an orphan school founded by Imam Yahya, headed the Foreign Office in 1962 and later became prime minister; Abd al-Latif Dayf Allah, who trained at the Military College in Cairo, was a member of the Revolutionary Command Council and minister of the interior under President Sallal (1962–1967).

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The revolutionary government created a new, predominantly secular education system modelled on that of Egypt. Egypt, whose troops helped to defeat royalist forces during the civil war (1962–1969) offered financial assistance and expertise. The Madrasah al-Ilmiyyah, in spite of its role in the constitutional movement, was closed. The education system was to become one of the pillars of legitimacy of the new regime and a symbol of nationalist pride. The establishment of Sana University in the 1970s expressed the new regime's self-assertion as a modern nation-state that had moved out of isolation and was promoting the nation's education and welfare. The plan to build a university was first put forward by the education minister, Qasim Ghalib. The project was important to decision makers because at that time the number of scholarships and fields of studies was decided by donor countries. For several years, the funds to implement the plan were unavailable.

However, the new elite consider university education abroad to be superior. They invest heavily into their sons' education at foreign, especially American and European, universities. This trend has increased since Kuwait ceased sponsoring Sana University following the Gulf crisis, and the quality of education generally deteriorated. Degrees from local universities carry far less prestige and provide few employment opportunities outside Yemen. Originally, Sana University attracted students even from remote corners of the country and was attended by a substantial number of women. With the economic crisis in full swing, enrollments at the secondary and university levels declined, especially among the rural population. In October 1999,

Sana University graduates demonstrated about not being offered jobs by the government upon graduation. In accordance with the Egyptian model, there is an expectation of government patronage.

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Expert knowledge obtained at foreign universities forms part of new practices that create both uniformity and competition among the new and the old elites. New hierarchical divisions are emerging between the well-to-do members of the old and new elites who are able to afford education abroad and an impoverished majority. The old elite has abandoned religious studies for career purposes; their tradition of scholarship predisposes them to obtain scholarships abroad and to succeed in their careers.

The political dimension of conflicts about knowledge is most apparent in the sphere of law and the dual higher education system that has emerged since the 1970s. During the Imamate, jurisprudence was the bastion of the well-trained elite. After the revolution, men who studied secular law in countries such as Egypt competed with and often replaced Shariah-trained judges, challenging their mo-

nopoly over the judiciary. Both these groups of legal experts have a common enemy: Neo-Salafi Islamists, who aided the government in defeating socialism, have since the late 1970s aspired to eliminate secular (and Shii) elements from the judiciary and the education system. New religious teaching institutions (al-Maahid al-Ilmiyyah) that enjoy Saudi sponsorship and the patronage of powerful politicians, among them the leader of the Islah party and speaker of Parliament, Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar, have not yet been brought under government control. As a response to Islamist agitation, the religious content of the government-sponsored curricula has been reinforced. Students' acquisition of different models of history at the various institutions raises questions about the role of education in the production of a unified nation-state. The university's role in the democratization process has been called into question with the growing influence of the Islamists.

In conclusion, since the early 20th century there has been a marked trend toward centralization and greater control of education, a process which accompanied by changes in the organization and perceptions of knowledge. The struggle during the Imamate over these issues has continued in the republic in different guises. The Yemeni nationalist project is subject to many different claims and appeals that are based on diverse sources of knowledge. ■

**Note**

1. Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 101–14, 120, 122.

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## Higher Education in Egypt: The Realpolitik of Privatization

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By the academic year 1999–2000, about 1.5 million students were attending Egypt's 12 state universities and their 7 branches. To this number, one has to add the newcomers—that is, 4 private universities attended by about 6,000 students. In spite of these small figures, private universities have rapidly acquired a major political significance as the most striking and controversial aspect of the privatization of higher education.

*Forms of Privatization*

In recent years, state universities have introduced foreign-language programs. These programs, for which tuition is charged, allow students originally from private foreign-language schools to follow a curriculum partly in English

or French. This ensures a higher-quality education, and better job prospects for those individuals already endowed with economic and cultural capital. Furthermore, some private schools are authorized to award diplomas from foreign secondary schools. Their students are thus able to avoid the nightmare of the *Thanawiyya 'amma* (nation-wide final secondary school examination), which simplifies access to university.

The ongoing debate over the new universities law, which is still under discussion, may illustrate the shifting equilibrium between state responsibilities and privatization that characterizes the current situation. The new law is supposed to replace the 1972 universities law and provide unified legislation for all the sectors of higher education: state and private universities, al-Azhar University, and higher institutes. Supporters of private higher education perceive this coming law as a way for the state to control private initiatives, while it is seen by public education supporters as a way to normalize and legitimize private higher education by including it within the larger body of na-