

Low Social and Political Returns to Education in the Arab World

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About the author

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In a nutshell

- Arab societies urgently need to start looking at how to improve education systems, not just in ways to improve the marketability of individuals, but as importantly, to improve their social and political impact on society, such as by strengthening a sense of community, beefing up values of civic engagement, inculcating democratic principles, supporting gender equality, and promoting social tolerance.

The policy discussion in the Arab world has rarely focused on the social and political returns of education, areas of keen interest in more democratic countries. This is unfortunate. The evidence uncovered in my recent research, and summarized here, is that the social and political returns to education are in fact much lower in the Arab world than in the rest of the world – in other words, educated Arabs are much less emancipated by their education on political and social values compared to their global peers. This means that unless policymakers start focusing on reforming the type of education Arab youth receive, it will remain difficult to foster more open societies in the Arab world.

Such claims are far from new. Qualitative critiques of Arab education systems abound. Summarizing a large literature that connects authoritarianism, education systems, and the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes, Faour and Muasher (2011) write:

“Are students taught what it means to be a citizen? Do they know at an early age—not just through formal learning but, more importantly, through practice—that there is usually more than one side to any particular issue, and that they should seek information about, and debate the many sides of, the issue? Are they taught to question, inquire, partici-

pate, work in teams, and communicate? Are they taught to uphold values such as freedom, equality, and respect for human rights? Or is “knowledge” spoon-fed to them in a manner that discourages questioning? Whole generations in the Arab world were ingrained with the notion that allegiance to one’s country means allegiance to the ruling political party, system, or leader, and that diversity, critical thinking, and individual differences are treacherous.”

The novelty of my research is that it looks at hard numbers and evaluates magnitudes. I use a unique database provided by the World Value Survey (WVS), a global opinion poll that measures in a representative way a broad range of political and social values in a comparative context. Recently released data, which was collected during 2011/2013, included information for the first time on twelve Arab countries (in addition to 75 non-Arab countries) -- Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Qatar, Yemen, Kuwait, and Libya. Other opinion surveys either do not cover the type of social and political values we are interested in looking at, or cover the Arab world but not the rest of the world -- making comparisons impossible. Indeed, the new WVS data allows us for the first time to compare the values of a sizable share of the Arab world with those of citizens from around the world, based on the individual responses of about 30,000 Arabs and 150,000 non-Arabs.

Using the WVS data, one can start by comparing an average Arab with an average citizen from the rest of the world, by averaging the responses of individuals in the Arab world and the larger global sample. But we can also be more demanding, and compare youth to youth, or educated to educated. The question of interest has less to do with whether more educated Arabs are more “emancipated” socially than uneducated Arabs, as they should be, but whether the gain in emancipation conferred by education is as large among Arabs as in the rest of the world.

I will focus here on the effect of education on five important values that can be measured, at the indi-

vidual level (my work has looked at many more values, but these are particularly revealing of the impact of education): her (or his) preference for democracy over autocracy; the extent of engagement in civic action; the extent of respect for authority; support for the patriarchal system; and the extent of support for religious conservatism (in the precise sense that all laws must be coherent with the Sharia). Below, I will unabashedly take more emancipation to mean a higher preference for democracy, more civic action, and a lower preference for patriarchy, authority, and social conservatism. By social conservatism, I will mean the reverse.

My empirical work reveals that when comparing the “average” values in the Arab world with those of the rest of the world, the “average Arab” is found to experience a deficit relative to the average global individual on all these five values. The average Arab has a lower preference for democracy (with a gap of 11%), is less active civically (a gap of 8%), respects authority more (by 11%), values the patriarchal system more (by a whopping 30%), and is more religiously conservative (by 18%).

On the other hand, when countries of the world are classified by their level of development (as measured by their GDP per capita), I find that, on average, citizens of richer countries tend to value democracy more, be more active on civic engagement, less patriarchal, less respectful of authority, and less religiously conservative. In short, people tend to become more emancipated socially when development rises. Citizens of Arab countries hold values that are similar to those in countries with much lower levels of development. In this sense, we can say that Arabs lag on the emancipation ladder on all the values analyzed here.

Parts of these differences can be due to local culture. Gorodnichenko and Roland (2010) show convincingly that cultures differ in the extent to which they favor individualism versus collectivism. They find that Arab culture is about mid-way between Anglo-Saxon individualism and Asian collectivism. But our findings indicate, as we will see below, that this cannot be the

whole explanation, and that a large part of the blame for the emancipation gap must rest not on Arab/Muslim culture, but on the type of education provided in Arab countries.

To see this, one needs to look closer at the values of different types of Arabs. The data reveals that not every Arab experiences similar deficits on the values considered here. We have a sufficiently large data set to compare the values held by citizens of Arab countries with particular characteristics - their age, level of education, and level of religiosity - to similar individuals living in other countries with a similar level of development. Such a comparison reveals a startling discovery: educated Arabs experience the largest gaps relative to educated global citizens. To appreciate this important result, it is useful to compare how education and other characteristic affect values in the global versus the more restricted Arab sample.

Looking first at the whole global sample, statistical inference reveals a pattern of relations between values and individual characteristics that is quite intuitive. For each of the five values considered here, younger and more educated individuals tend to be more "emancipated" than older and less educated individuals. Women are variably more or less socially emancipated than men, depending on the value considered - importantly, they are less for patriarchy, but they are also less active civically. Among men and women, religiosity tends to foster "conservative" values.

In order to figure out the main culprits for the Arab social gaps, we can now do a similar exercise in the smaller Arab sample, and compare the structure of value preference between the Arab global samples. Doing this reveals important findings on the impact of education, age, and religiosity on values:

- Educated Arabs are less emancipated than their global peers. They are more emancipated than uneducated Arabs (on all values but respect for authority, where they fare worse). Much of this is well known with the groundbreaking work of Mark Tessler and Amaney Jamal (2006). But the new and important finding here is that the extent

of the emancipation due to education is small in the Arab world, compared to the global experience.

- On the other hand, there is nothing terribly "exceptional" about Arab youth and about religious Arabs, as the effect of age and religiosity on values are similar (controlling for education) in the Arab world with the rest of the world. The only qualifier here is that there are many more religious people in the Arab world compared to the rest of the world (about twice as many), and this explains a part of the region's excess conservatism.

To get a better feel for the relative importance of age, education, and religiosity in accounting for the total Arab gap, we can compare the values of four (synthetic) individuals: two university educated 25-year-old males with average religious beliefs, one from the Arab world and one from the rest of the world. And two "average" individuals, an average Arab, and an average global citizen. Let us focus on the preference for democracy (PfD). In our sample, the average Arab has a gap relative to the average global citizen of 11%. These two individuals have about the same age and education levels (based on the data), but the average Arab is, as stated earlier, more religious. This excess religiosity explains 2 points of the gap, the rest of the gap can be attributable to other aspects of local culture.

But let us focus on the effects of young age and education, which turn out to swamp the effects of local culture. The global 25 years old university graduate is estimated to have a surplus on PfD relative to our average global individual of 16 points -- with 6 points attributable to his youth, and 10 points to his education. On the other hand, the Arab educated youth is found to have an excess of PfD relative to the average Arab of 6 points, 3 on account of age, and 3 on account of education. As a result, education emancipates the global youth much more than the Arab youth. Instead of university education allowing Arab youth to catch up with their global counterparts, it actually increases the distance in their values.

How then can we explain the emancipation gap of the educated Arabs?

It is unlikely that this gap can be attributable to the effects of local culture. One would expect, instead, that when local culture fosters conservative values, this would occur among the poor and uneducated who tend to be more influenced by local culture than by ideas coming from the rest of the world. Conversely, one would expect the educated to be more influenced by global than by local culture, under normal circumstances. Thus, to explain their more conservative values compared to similarly educated global individuals, one is led to point a finger at the type education that Arabs receive.

Since education emancipates in the world on average, but fosters social and political conservatism in the Arab region, it is tempting to think that this happens by design -- the result of a deliberate policy of using education in the Arab world as a tool of indoctrination, with the goal of consolidating autocracy, as argued by Faour and Muasher in the quote above in the case of the Arab world, and as claimed by sociologists in a global context (in particular, Bourdieu's (1998) defining work shows how institutions work to ensure the survival of the system by shaping elite values).

Indoctrination policies in education can be seen as an effort to use schooling in order to change individual preferences, in particular by fostering the values of political quietism and support for the status quo. A review of the pedagogical literature on the Arab world reveals many indications of indoctrination at work -- rote learning, a lack of interest in analytical capabilities, an exaggerated focus on religious values, the discouragement of self-expressive traits in favor of conformism, and a lack of involvement by students in community affairs -- all methods geared to inculcate values of obedience and lack of questioning authority. Arab regimes had the will and the capacity to engage in such deep social engineering. Starting with the mass education movements since the 1960s, meritocratic education systems were increasingly turned into tools of the social re-engineering of society. In the early days of independence, this engineering was

in the service of a top-down version of nationalism, revolution, and development. But over time, and as the state-led modernization effort failed and governance became increasingly more autocratic, education policies and institutions were increasingly molded towards more conservative ideals whose goals became narrower and increasingly less socially emancipative. The policy implications are clear. Arab societies urgently need to start looking at how to improve education systems, not just in ways to improve the marketability of individuals, but also to improve their social and political impact on society, such as by strengthening a sense of community, beefing up values of civic engagement, inculcating democratic principles, supporting gender equality, and promoting social tolerance.

Box 1: Defining the Variables of Interest

These variables are based on individual answers on a scale of 1-10, to express the intensity of the respondent's attachment to particular values. Here is a short summary of the survey questions that were used to construct these variable. *Preference for democracy* is an index of responses to questions that ask individuals to rank values associated with democracy with values associated with strong rule. *Civic participation* is also an index based on three questions on whether respondents have voted in the last elections, signed a petition, or participated in a boycott or a demonstration in the recent past. *Respect for authority* is measured through an index constructed on the basis of two questions relating to whether "greater respect for authority is a good thing," and obeying rules "is an essential characteristic of a democracy." *Support for patriarchy* is also an index, which combines answers to three questions: "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women;" "on the whole, men make better political leaders than women do;" and "a university education is more important for a boy than for a girl." Finally, the *support for religious conservatism* (which can be interpreted as support for political Islam in the context of the Arab world) uses a question about whether "Religious authorities should ultimately interpret the laws."

Recommended readings

- Al-Issis, Mohamad, and Ishac Diwan. Individual Preferences for Democracy In the Arab World - Explaining the Gap. ERF working paper, forthcoming, 2016.
- Diwan, Ishac. Values and Opinions of Arab Youth in a Comparative Context. Chapter 2, in UNDP Arab Development Report, forthcoming, 2016
- Faour, Muhammad and Marwan Muasher. Education for Citizenship in the Arab world - Key to the Future. Carnegie Middle East Center, October 2011.
- Glaeser, E. L., Ponzetto, G. A., & Shleifer, A. (2007). Why Does Democracy Need Education? *Journal of Economic Growth*, 12(2), 77-99.
- Gorodnichenko, Y., & Roland, G. (2010). Culture, Institutions and the Wealth Of Nations (No. w16368). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel. 2010. "Changing Mass Priorities: The Link Between Modernization and Democracy." *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (02): 551-567.
- Jamal, Amaney. (2006). Who Are The Democrats And Islamists in The Arab World?" *World Affairs*, 169(2), 51-63.

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“Going beyond Doing Business to Foster Job Creation in Arab Countries” by Jamal Ibrahim Haidar and Hedi Larbi, ERF Policy Briefs No. 7, April 2016.

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“Farmer Access to Formal Credit Institutions in Kassala, East Sudan: Determinants and Possible Ways Forward” by Ebaidalla Mahjoub Ebaidalla and Eltyeb Mohamdain Abdalla, ERF Policy Briefs No. 3, September 2015.

“Pension Reform: Securing Morocco’s Elderly” by Najat El Mekkaoui de Freitas, ERF Policy Briefs No. 2, June 2015.

“Transforming Egypt: Innovation and Diversification as Drivers of Growth” by Markus Loewe, ERF Policy Briefs No. 1, June 2015.

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