This literature review on equity in Middle East and North African tertiary education has been produced as a background note for the overall World Bank “Equity of access and success in tertiary education” study.
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Rationale

Education contributes in profound and fundamental ways to economic and human development. Research has consistently shown that education leads to improved wages of individuals and to improved macroeconomic performance overall. What’s more, education enriches students’ lives, helping them to build wider and more diverse social networks and find greater meaning in their experiences.

Most international donors and development programs have made education, particularly at the primary school level, a cornerstone of their aid portfolios.1 The Millennium Development Goals, for instance, aims for universal primary education for boys and girls. Numerous other programs as well have helped boost literacy levels worldwide, including in the MENA region. Tertiary education, including undergraduate and graduate university studies, receives relatively less attention at the level of international policy, although it is hardly ignored. Still, while early education is of course critical to fighting poverty, higher education may be equally important to producing dynamic and sustainable economies, societies, and individuals.2 Human development relies on both a push from the bottom and a pull from the top.

Equity in tertiary education varies by country and region, including in the Middle East and North Africa. Research has demonstrated that access to tertiary education is correlated to family

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1 Jagbans Balbir, “Fifty Years of International Co-Operation for the Development of Higher Education”
2 Ibid, 5-7
income and background.\textsuperscript{3} This lack of access hampers the development of human capital as talented students forego tertiary education for lack of means.\textsuperscript{4}

In our contemporary international framework, education is a human right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26, dictates, “Everyone has the right to education. That education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available, and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”

As the concept note to this World Bank project notes, a variety of common policies and procedures exist to relieve barriers to education.\textsuperscript{5} Affirmative action programs for marginalized groups, support to primary and secondary schools (especially disadvantaged ones), and other programs training and equipping youth can all boost young peoples’ chance of admission and success to higher education and post-secondary training institutions. Meanwhile, tuition waivers, grants, and student loans can all offset financial burdens.

Yet, the global reality is far from equitable in most contexts. Even when aggressive programs to offset financial barriers to education exist—as is the case in many of the MENA countries—social and macroeconomic forces can still make education unattainable for large segments of society. In the MENA region, both vertical and horizontal barriers exist to equity in tertiary education. Slow economic growth, widespread unemployment, and poverty impose significant

\textsuperscript{3} McPherson and Schapiro, 2006  
\textsuperscript{4} Harbison, 1964; Ramcharan, 2004  
\textsuperscript{5} Project Concept Note
burdens on MENA societies’ abilities to pay for university educations, either at the level of individual students paying fees, or states themselves covering the costs of public universities.

Access and equity issues affect education at all stages, from primary to secondary to tertiary schools. According to the World Bank report on gender and development, approximately 9 million children in MENA were out of school in 1995. This figure includes 5 million children ages 6 to 10, and 4 million children ages 11 to 15.6 Emphasizing the need for “significant policy shifts,” the report estimates an increase to 13 million children overall by 2015. These structural impediments early on affect the overall educational system. If students do not receive adequate primary or secondary education, they will not be prepared for tertiary education. Indeed, the landscape of societal inequities along lines of gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, physical handicaps, and social class will be reflected in local schools and classrooms, as well as within university faculties.

Increasing the equality of access to education is an important and attainable goal. The rationale behind this timely World Bank study is to inform policies and programs aimed at improving the equity of MENA students, regardless of their demographic, to tertiary education. As the universal human rights declaration states it, any person should have an equal access based on his/or her merit. This report will examine the opportunities and lack thereof in the MENA population, analyzing the equity or inequity of the different systems of education offer.

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Methodology and Scope of Study

The report is the product of extensive research of existing literature on education in the MENA region, including official and unofficial publications of governments, bilateral donors, and international financial institutions. The paper set out to accomplish the following research tasks on the MENA region:

- Collecting basic research on equity and tertiary education in MENA
- Reviewing the literature to identify key terms and issues
- Identifying the evaluation of equity issues and themes over time, to “map” the field in a way that informs subsequent studies
- Examining and analyzing the monetary barriers to equity and access
- Exploring and analyzing equity efforts that have and have not worked.

The research was conducted largely using publicly available articles and reports available through the internet, institutional websites, and academic databases. In some cases, colleagues within national ministries of education or educational systems were contacted for clarifying questions, although these interviews were conducted primarily to guide further research of official policy and procedures, rather than to provide primary source content in its own right.

Unfortunately, after a thorough investigation on the subject matter, a profound lack of data emerged as a barrier to the research aims. Simply put, the Western notion of laws concerning equality, access, and equity does not really exist in the socio-political context of MENA societies. Although the majority of MENA countries have made public pronouncements signaling a commitment to improved equity of access in education, few to none of these states
have developed policy frameworks to support these broad sketches. Instead, the MENA region’s strategies for tertiary education, to the extent that such strategies exist at all, are guided by informal and unspoken rules and policies.

Lack of evidence should not be taken as a sign to dismiss the research questions. To be certain, barriers to access exist in a variety of forms and differing by country. The task for this report and others like it is actually twofold: first, to advocate for or collect new empirical data on policy and practice with regard to access in the MENA region; second, to draw on a wide range of sources to increase the nuance of our collective understanding, to frame our research efforts, and to ensure region-wide research efforts remain grounded in national and local realities.

The report is therefore structured in three parts: The first part examines the policy literature on educational access and equity, developing a set of key terms and issues, and identifying areas for further research. The second part seeks to “map” the current context of the MENA region, drawing on historical and qualitative analysis. Finally, the third section lays out recommendations for future research and policy-making.

Data and Research Concerns

Lamentably, information on equity and access in the MENA region is severely lacking. Some universities provide basic data on their web pages about their selection criteria and admissions processes, while others do not. Most ministries of higher education in the MENA region do not have their policies regarding access available on their web site. Indeed, many do not have formal policies at all. Even international research institutions’ coverage of MENA is limited at times compared to other regions. Akkari points out that SERI, a research body, investigated
educational research practices all across the Third World, except for in MENA. Conducting the research for this report has been a matter of piecing it together from various sources: academic research, universities, Ministries of Education, international organizations (IOs) like the United Nations, and international financial institutions (IFIs) such as The World Bank. Taken together, the information paints a scattered picture of access to tertiary education and the history of MENA region states’ strategies to improve access, outcomes, and success.

Affirmative action policies offer preferential treatment in university admissions to underrepresented groups. Such policies are perhaps the most obvious means of overcoming the non-financial barriers to access. Yet, official affirmative action policies are not evidenced in the policy documentation of MENA states. For example, many MENA states and their international donors have made women’s education a policy priority, according to official statements and aid programs. However, research has not yielded any concrete affirmative action policies in MENA states to further women’s educational access at the tertiary level. Evidently, there is a gap between *de jure* pronouncements and *de facto* practice in the area of women’s access to education.

The MENA region, unfortunately, is marked by high levels of governmental secrecy. Instead of official policies, the norm across MENA states is a system of informal, often unspoken policies. It is not uncommon to find citizens of these countries, or even public officials who acknowledge that a certain custom or system exists in practice, perhaps with full participation and cooperation on the part of the state. These individuals, however, are reluctant to identify the practice in any

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public setting or “go on record.” While rumor and conspiracy theory are rife, ‘popular wisdom’ is often accurate or grounded in truth, although it is extremely difficult in the absence of quality empirical data to judge where rumor and anecdote is supported by widespread fact.

Furthermore, as noted above, sub-regional and national differences complicate the empirical process further still, when two countries might pursue similar de jure policies, but have different de facto practices. Ideally, in addition to more quantitative data, future research will make use of experts working in-country in the major states of interest in the region.

Without a doubt, the best quality data available on the region comes not from the MENA states, but from IOs and IFIs, notably UNESCO and the World Bank. In addition to the many reports offered by these institutions, an annotated bibliography is offered at the end of this report to provide guidance to future researchers on the topic.

**Composition of the MENA Region: Implications for Research**

In the World Bank’s lexicon, the MENA Region includes Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank and Gaza (Palestine), and Yemen\(^8\). Israel is included on the website, but it is often analyzed separately, due to its greater similarities and ties to European economies. A shorthand definition of the Bank’s MENA definition is often summarized as ‘the Arab league plus Iran and minus a few African members.’

Almost all the MENA states are Arab countries (the most notable exception being Iran). As such, they share common ties of ethnicity, culture, and language. Yet, due to the vast territorial

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\(^8\) World Bank Website, [http://go.worldbank.org/7UEP77ZCB0](http://go.worldbank.org/7UEP77ZCB0)
expanse of the region, the historical development of the MENA countries varies by sub-region.\textsuperscript{9} Sharp gaps in income and wealth also create fairly region-wide barriers along lines of social class, although the politics determining how and where these lines of class are determined vary along historical and regional bases. For example, Egypt and Morocco, with large populations and widespread poverty, face very different problems Qatar or UAE, which both enjoy high per capita incomes thanks to small populations and large-scale oil exports. The Maghreb countries of North Africa, including Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, share common a common educational framework inherited from the French colonialists, whereas the countries of the Levant, including Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, have their own unique historical experience with the Ottoman Empire, the Mandate Period, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Meanwhile, conflict and post-conflict dynamics in Algeria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq—each profoundly different from the other—also add complexity to a regional analysis. Thus, the economic structures of the various countries differ, as do the quality of services (including education) they provide.\textsuperscript{10}

The role of women and their access to education and labor market is probably the most common issue across the region for the purposes of this study. Even here, substantial variations exist by country. Tunisia has been fairly progressive in its family policy, while Saudi Arabia consistently scores among the worst countries in the world among indexes of women’s rights.

It would also be a mistake to interpret the region as an Arab or Islamic monolith. Even among Arabs, significant cultural and linguistic differences exist across regions—the Bedouin in


\textsuperscript{10} Margareta Drzeniek Hanouz and Tarik Yousef. \textit{Chapter 11: Assessing Competitiveness in the Arab World: Strategies for Sustaining the Growth Momentum}. 2007
Egypt’s Sinai lead very different lives, with different values, from urban residents of Cairo. Iran, although it has a significant Arab minority, is different in many ways from its neighbors to the West. Kurds in Iraq, Syria, and Iran should also not be dismissed, nor the Berber and Sahrawi populations of Morocco and Algeria. Differing religious practices of Islam, including Shia and Sunni sects, and different ideas about Islamic jurisprudence create real differences in daily lives and behaviors of Muslims. Meanwhile, religious minorities must also be recognized: Christians in Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon; Druze and Alawites in Greater Syria; and Jews in Morocco and Iran.

It would be a mistake to view regional-level data and analysis wholly uncritically, without taking account of the sub-regional and national variations. These demographic balances have very real implications for the status of women, for allocations of state resources, for early schooling, and ultimately for national politics and policies. When it comes to equity in tertiary education, the research lens and the questions we ask about who is included or excluded from participation should not merely look to disaggregate data long typical lines of men, women, income level, and town. Popular wisdom suggests that MENA states may often bury information about these sizeable demographics, although there are often informal practices based on ethnicity, tribe, political affiliation, etc. Thus, robust analysis will draw on political, ethnographic, and demographic understanding of each country to determine the actual level of equity.

**Analysis: Main Equity Challenges to Tertiary Education**

In terms of inequity in tertiary education, the concept note to this project identifies two dimensions of analysis: vertical and horizontal. Two additional categories of "non-monetary" or
“monetary” describe the types barriers in that may arise. The vertical dimension refers to “stages of enrollment in tertiary education,” namely: admission, retention, and completion.

Questions to ask in regards to these aspects of enrollment include:

- What are the demographics (gender, age, social class, ethnicity/religion, regional background) of those students who are admitted to tertiary education?
- How, if at all, do retention and completion rates vary across demographic groups? Why?

The horizontal dimension of inequity looks, “not simply [at] how many students attend tertiary education, but what kind of institution they attend and what labor market opportunities various degrees then offer to graduates.” Questions in regards to horizontal inequity include the following:

- What are the overall numbers of students enrolled in public universities in the country compared to private universities? Or, what is the national profile of different universities in terms of the levels of public funding they receive, admissions selectivity, tuition/fees, and student/teacher ratio?
- How many students are studying abroad? Where?
- How does the demographic composition of students vary from public to private universities?
- What is the composition of leaders in government, business, and academia in terms of the universities attended and fields of study?

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• What is the employment rate of graduates of public universities 1, 3, and 5 years out from graduation? What is the average pay? How does it differ from one university to another?

At the structural level, access to higher education may be determined by both the supply and demand for tertiary education. On the supply side, the number and quality of universities may reflect the size of the state’s overall budget for tertiary education. The relative size of this budget compared to primary and secondary education, and also relative to non-education expenditures, could be an indicator of the de facto level of state interest in promoting education. At the level of the Ministries of Education and/or universities, the composition of the budget is also likely to be informative. Is money being applied to expanding campus infrastructure in new building projects, hiring or retaining high-quality faculty, sponsoring research, or providing “affirmative action” and financial assistance to targeted groups? Of course, anecdotal evidence suggests that the officially reported budgets of many MENA states are not fully grounded in reality.

The costs associated with building quality institutions in particular may vary by region. Countries which experience high levels of overall inequity or underdevelopment are likely to find it more difficult (and costly) to retain intellectual talent, as high-quality professors and students emigrate to universities abroad. This is the process of brain drain. Egypt’s economic liberalization in the 1970s, and the economic challenges this process created for the middle class, led many academics—particularly in science, medicine, and technology—to emigrate abroad,
often not to return. In some cases, however, an opposite flow occurs. The case of the Gulf countries in particular is illustrative, as discussed later on this report.

For students themselves, the cost of studying, both in fees and foregone income (opportunity cost) can be a significant financial barrier. Cultural norms in MENA states call for young men to support their family, and many may not be able to take time necessary for studies away from earning income. Fee structures are likely to vary from country to country, and, indeed, within countries between institutions. Distribution of wealth will determine whether even relatively modest fees at public institutions remain out-of-reach for the most vulnerable groups.

Non-financial variables, such as academic ability or student motivation, as well as demographic profiles of students along lines of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, political affiliation, and class all play a role. These features may whether a student is admitted and how long that student continues his or her studies (vertical equity). They may also determine what quality of education the student receives at the primary and secondary levels, which in turn affects their academic performance on university entrance exams and later on in the university.

Needless to say, the overall socio-economic structure of the system, the financial and non-financial barriers to study, and the vertical and horizontal dimensions of inequity are all interrelated. Indeed, a cross-cutting determinant of tertiary education, which has both direct and indirect effects, is violent conflict. War and terrorism profoundly affect economies and societies,
including through education. In Iraq, for example, the on-going violence has included suicide bombings at universities, limiting students’ abilities to complete their degrees, and discouraging new students from entering the system. To the extent that conflict or post-conflict dynamics affect a large number of the countries in the MENA region, the equity in access to tertiary education in these societies is likely to be affected.

The following pages are organized thematically along lines of the major themes of the research. They are as follows:

1. Policy History
2. Social Class and Population Growth
3. Women’s Access
4. Preferential Admissions and Political Discrimination
5. Public and Private Institutions
6. Conflict

Policy History

Education is widely recognized as a critical component to regional development.\textsuperscript{15} Researchers argue that the major trend over the past three decades has been a rise in qualification requirements for employment, driven mostly by technological change. The qualitative aspects of human life have also been influenced heavily by education. Numerous studies on poverty provide evidence that one of the most important characteristics of the poor is their lack of education or the low quality of education they have received. Data on the MENA region indicate that earnings increased with the level of education during the 1980s and the early 1990s. There is also a strong relationship between poverty, fertility behavior, child mortality and female education. Massiala and Jarrar describe how conservatism in the Arab World is gaining force in many instances as a result of the inequities in the distribution of wealth, and the gap between the

\textsuperscript{15} Aysit Tansel and Abbas Kazemi. “Educational Expenditure in the Middle East and North Africa.” \textit{Middle Eastern Studies} Vol. 36, no. 4 (Oct. 2000), 79
rich and poor Arab societies. They add that more traditional rather than transformational structures seem to prevail, thus delaying the possibilities for the Arab societies to change.

The MENA region places great value on education. The Arab nationalist movements of the first half of the 20th century saw education as a means to advance their societies as industrial powers and independent nations. Similar national aspirations tied to education were prominent in the policies of Atatürk, the Iranian Shahs, and the Zionist movement. Many Muslims continue to look back to the heritage of Baghdad and Damascus, Qom and Najaf, centers of medieval scientific and religious learning, to draw inspiration for current education projects. Even today, some of the medieval universities of religious scholarship such as Al-Azhar in Cairo and Qaraouiyine in Fès retain their cultural significance in the Arab world and continue to train scholars. When U.S. President Barack Obama chose to address the Muslim world in spring 2009, it was from Al-Azhar that he delivered his speech—a strategic gesture to the cultural symbolism of the institution.

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, following the regional leadership of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, several of the Arab MENA countries, instituted policies of free and open education at the tertiary level. These policies made dramatic changes to the student body profile of the MENA region, especially in terms of access and quality, as well as to the education budget compositions of the various states. Education expenditures “increased markedly from 1965 to 1990 for all the

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16 Massiala and Jarrar 1983
17 Landau 1997, 2
20 Landau 1997, 13
countries,” moving from 3.9 to 5.7 percent (albeit with substantial variance across countries). Tertiary education has drawn about a third of these expenditures, with more money per student spent on fewer students. Today, MENA government’s spending on education is among the highest in the world.

In absolute terms, enrollment surged in MENA countries such as Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia throughout the second half of the 20th century, leading to high levels of equity in access, especially compared to other emerging market countries of Latin America or Southeast Asia. The region-wide mean level of enrollment at the tertiary level rose from 4.7% in 1970 to 25.8% in 1990, with many countries enrolling well over a third of the population in recent years. In recent years, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education in the MENA region has risen from 3.2 million in 1996 to 7.2 million in 2006. In 1996, for each 100,000 inhabitants, only 1,202 would attain college while this number has increased by 2006 to 2,230 people per 100,000. However, the number of youth in the MENA region has surged, and today, the share of the population under 30 in MENA countries ranges from 25 to 50 percent—a staggering figure, which places strains on the capacity of public universities.

Women’s education in particular benefited, although the gains have been hard won and in some cases women’s equality in education remains tentative or incomplete. For instance, girls in rural and impoverished areas continue to have poor access to primary and secondary education. Early marriage also proves to be a barrier, and even for women who do attend university, their

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21 Tansel and Kazemi 2000. 80
22 Ibid.
23 World Bank, “The Road Not Traveled.” 24
25 See for example Tabutin et al 2005, 537
choice of studies and job prospects remain limited to socially accepted fields for women. These barriers are discussed at greater length in the section below.

Figure 1 (Table 1.4) below from The World Bank’s 2008 report “The Road Not Traveled,” below shows that enrollment rates in both secondary and tertiary schools have increased substantially since 1970 across the region:

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<th>TABLE 1.4</th>
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<th>2003</th>
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<td>1.8</td>
<td>51.4</td>
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<td>Iran, Islamic Rep.of</td>
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<td>53.8</td>
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<td>Iraq</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<td>32.8</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
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<td>6.8</td>
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<td>6.8</td>
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<td>West Bank and Gaza</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1: THE WORLD BANK, 2008 DATA

26 Similar figures are born out in Tansel and Kazemi (Educational Expenditure in the Middle East, p. 77, Table 1).
Outside the traditional centers of Arab culture (namely, Egypt, the Maghreb, and the Levant), Gulf countries have also made impressive strides, often fueled by oil wealth and facilitated by the ease of governing relatively small populations. They account for only eight per cent of enrollment in Arab universities, and they have the best student-teacher ratios in the MENA region. Tansel and Kazemi note that Gini coefficients (measures of inequality) have remained quite high among the Gulf states, whereas in other countries like Morocco, they have decreased since 1980. Thus, inequity in access remains an issue across the region, but differs by sub-region, although it appears that non-monetary barriers were more significant than monetary ones.

To the extent that certain MENA states—particularly the oil-rich Gulf countries—have an educational plan in place, it is typically to expand private opportunities at the upper end of the spectrum, such as through the construction of satellite campuses for foreign universities. These projects are extremely expensive, and if the global recession continues, they may prove unsustainable. Even if they remain, the projects primarily serve an international elite, rather than poor populations. A recent report on global competitiveness noted as well that the educational quality of even the best economically performing Gulf countries—UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar—lag other countries in their global peer group in terms of educational quality and access. Indeed, widening inequalities in societies at large threaten to undermine the gains in access since the 1960s. Notably, research has shown that social and non-financial matters can an extremely

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27 Landau 1997, 15
28 Tansel and Kazemi, Educational Expenditure, 90
29 Indeed, an entirely separate area of (politically charged) research might take up the question of education and services for immigrant labor in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar.
30 Hanouz and Yousef 2007, 9-11
influential role in determining whether students pursue higher education.\textsuperscript{31} While enrollment in primary and secondary schools across MENA remains relatively strong, poor and rural areas do not have full enrollment. Furthermore, the quality of education at these levels can be quite low. Instruction is often in the form of rote learning, and teachers themselves may not receive adequate training or compensation, leading to even lower results. Thus, while university may remain technically open to all, without sufficient education at earlier stages, students will not be prepared for admission to tertiary education\textsuperscript{32}.

International development programs have often focused on primary education and literacy campaigns. These remain important, but the case for a renewed focus on educational quality, as well as tertiary education, is gaining strength. Indeed, tertiary education has not been ignored in the development push for schooling expenditures. While a review of Figure XX / Table 1.2 from the World Bank’s 2008 report (reproduced below) on education in the MENA region reveals first a lack of data on tertiary education. To the extent that data does exist for Iran, Morocco, Oman, and Tunisia, the distribution shows these countries spending more per pupil on tertiary education than for earlier stages of schooling.

\textsuperscript{31} The project concept note reports a follows: “At the same time, a considerable amount of empirical research in the US on the effects of financial aid policies on enrollment shows that financial interventions, while influential for those predisposed to postsecondary education, are not sufficient to ensure equal access for many economically disadvantaged groups (De La Rosa and Tierney 2006; Perna and Titus 2004; Kim 2004; Cunningham, Redmond, and Merisotis 2003; Pope and Fermin 2003; Perna and Swail 2001; Long and Riley 2007; Carneiro and Heckman 2002; Frenette 2007). There is growing realization that the decision—and ability—to pursue postsecondary education is influenced by economics but determined more by a confluence of personal, social, and institutional variables.”

\textsuperscript{32} See for example, The World Bank, “The Road Not Traveled,” 2008, Table 1.11, “Enrollment Rates for Poor and Non-Poor”
This commitment to education has had a positive effect on income, increasing the supply and quality of MENA labor markets—particularly for women. Tunisia in particular, by combining educational reform with a relaxed—even secularist—approach to religion, made particular headway on women’s issues.

However, notwithstanding these and similar successes, problems remain. The World Bank’s 2008 report notes, “reforms have not fully delivered on their promises. In particular, the relationship between education and economic growth has remained weak, the divide between education and employment has not been bridged, and the quality of education continues to be..."
disappointing." Rapid population growth challenged countries like Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen to maintain universal public education. Rural populations, such as the mountain populations of Morocco and Yemen, also remained largely out of state reach.

Poor strategic planning and fiscal management has led to a deteriorating situation. Bloated national budgets resulting from high levels spending on all sectors of the economy led to increasing economic stagnation across much of the MENA region. The resulting cutbacks in services in the 1980s and 1990s—initially resisted by most of the regions’ governments—dug into education as well. Quality declined as classroom supply began to be exceeded by the demand. From primary school through university, rote learning methods often prevailed over more engaged teaching methodologies. Although in countries like Egypt, public tertiary education was still technically an option, elites and the state increasingly turned to private schools at all levels in place of public systems. Therefore, non-financial barriers and horizontal dimensions of inequity became more the norm.

In sum, higher education in the MENA region is at a moment of truth. Traditional systems for provision of education have produced some marked success, but the old systems are no longer functioning as intended or in a forward-looking fashion. The absence of transparent policies in tertiary education reflects a deeper malaise. Inadequate policies, rules, and regulations leave access rights unprotected, and inequity along lines such as gender, age, community, and class remains intact. As discussed in the following pages, educational systems in practice often

35 World Bank, “The Road Not Traveled,” 2008, xvi
36 Akkari 2004, 146
37 Ibid.
38 Lisa Anderson, “Political Decay in the Arab World”
39 Landau 1997, 11; See also Anderson, “Political Decay in the Arab World,” 5
replicate or exacerbate existing socio-economic inequities rather than mitigate them. Yet, without clear policies one way or another, it is difficult to identify a problem, set a benchmark, or identify progress. Broadly speaking the fundamental challenge facing higher education in the MENA region is a lack of coherent strategy.

The first step for policy, then, is to become more explicit about what the policies are and how they should change. The next few pages outline some of the major challenges to educational policy and practice thus far and at present.

**Social Class and Population Growth**

Worldwide, the most common indicator of educational level is the total number of students per capita. The numbers of youth are truly staggering: about 50 percent of the globe’s population is under 24. Youth aged 15 to 24, or those generally at the secondary and tertiary levels of education, amount to about a billion. The World Education Forum expects these numbers to continue increasing rapidly.

The total population of the MENA region has also grown rapidly, increasing nearly 400% from 100 million in 1950 to 380 million in 2000. Growth remains high, at approximately 2% per year.\(^{40}\) Estimates suggest that the MENA region population will reach 600 million by 2025.\(^ {41}\) This rapid population growth rate, particularly when inhabited land accounts for only a fraction (about 4 percent) of the total geographic area, is probably the most significant challenge facing the MENA region.\(^ {42}\)

\(^{40}\) Tabutin et al 2005, 508
\(^{41}\) Youssef 1999
\(^{42}\) Al-Hamad 2003, 12
Although the birthrate in MENA has declined since the 1980s (it averaged 7 children per child in the 1950s), the region is still home to approximately 70 million people between the age old 15-24 representing. This youth demographic represents 21.5 percent of the population, and children under the age of 15 comprise another 45 percent of the region’s population. This “youth boom” or “baby boom” has already affected the region’s education systems, and promises to continue the process of profound changes. Indeed, the development of the MENA over the next 60 years hinges on whether this mass of young people become a “demographic gift,” contributing to economic growth with productive, skilled labor, or “demographic time bomb,” straining the system towards collapse and falling prey to societal ills such as crime and political unrest.

Raising educational levels is a priority for all development policies. Yet, as the rising fertility figures and youth boom suggests, educational development will not be easy. This mass of young people will cause, according to the World Bank’s 2008 report, a “steep rise in meeting this demand” and “an increase in demand related for different educational outcomes,” meaning the new situation will force MENA countries to create new and different opportunities.

In Palestine, for example, a baby boom has created a surge in demand for university education, straining the system. According to the Brookings Institution, beginning in the mid-1970s, political parties (both Islamist and secularist) began promulgating pro-baby polices. In the eyes of many across the Palestinian political spectrum, large families were almost a patriotic duty. In

43 U.S. Department of State 2005 data
45 Fuller 2003
the Gaza Strip, for example, it is not uncommon to encounter families with 15 to 20 children. This “youth bulge” has placed considerable demands on primary and secondary schools—and now on colleges and universities. Palestine now has among the highest proportions of private enrollment in the region.

According to a recent World Bank report, education systems have experienced “uncontrolled growth” and “unplanned expansion.” The report questions the social relevance and academic quality of the system, which is dependent on “unreliable financing” from a government that the report pronounced “ineffective.” Like the educational systems of many neighboring countries in the Middle East (Israel is the exception), Palestine’s faces various difficulties related to the socioeconomic profile of its students, the geopolitical situation, and the population boom among college-age Palestinians. The challenge for these institutions of higher education and their professors is to satisfy the increasing demand while maintaining a high standard for the programs they offer.

Of course, in the absence of a growing labor market, education will leave many with nowhere to turn upon graduation. The economies of the MENA region at present are already marked by high levels of unemployment, as well as underemployment. Most people with any familiarity with the region, whether from Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, or beyond, have anecdotes of meeting taxi drivers or tour guides holding advanced degrees in the sciences, engineering, law, or health, but the lack of employment opportunity or wage differentials lead them to take up work in menial service work instead. Yousef notes, for instance, that unemployment rates are highest for youths

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46 World Bank 2004 report.
with intermediate and upper levels of education.\textsuperscript{47} Such lack of opportunity can breed extremism. A large number of the radical Islamist groups count doctors, engineers, and lawyers among their ranks—professionals who were not able to find opportunities to meet their human needs. Meanwhile, a considerable part of the labor mark in many of the MENA countries remains the public sector. In fact, the World Bank estimates that returns to education at the public sector are actually higher than in private businesses, partly as a result of the large role government bureaucracies play in hiring.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, structural reforms beyond education are likely necessary in order to provide for job creation over the long term. Yet, improvements in education must be supplemented by such job-oriented reforms if educations’ intended benefits are to be realized.

\textbf{Women’s Access}

By most accounts, women are the new “untapped resources in the region”. Programs aimed at advancing and supporting women’s education in MENA are widespread and highly-touted. Indeed, in the Arab world, formal education for women is less than two hundred years old. Egypt opened the first modern school for women in 1829, with Iraq and the Levant following suit in the decades shortly thereafter. When Bahrain opened its first women’s school (the first among the Gulf countries) in 1928, women in Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq still had not gained admission to universities—this took another decade. As for the Gulf, Saudi Arabia did not offer formal women’s education until 1960, and Oman not until 1970.

More recently, women have benefited from the Nasser-era policies of free public education, which allowed more women to attend university in larger numbers—although their fields of

\textsuperscript{47} Yousef 2004, 103
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid. 113
study were still often socially restricted to those subjects considered appropriate for women.\textsuperscript{49}

Nevertheless, social change continues, and MENA families have attained greater “social awareness” of the importance of educating their daughters. Among other things, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have highlighted the importance of girls’ education, and many Arab countries appear to be on track to meet these targets—although the data supporting governments’ official figures may deserve external scrutiny.

The situation is improved today in many respects, although there is still a long way to go. Women represent approximately 49% of the MENA region’s population, but they comprise 63% of the university students in some countries\textsuperscript{50}. In Palestine, for example, university enrollment for male students in the Territories increased at a rate of 6.4\% from 1997-1998 and 2002-2003, while for women it was 11.6\%\textsuperscript{51}. Overall, the average number of schooling for girls has increased from 0.5 years in 1950 to 4.5 in 1999. At the primary school level, enrollment rates for girls are roughly on par with those for boys. MENA women’s average literacy rate also rose from 16.6 percent in 1970 to 52.5 percent in 2000.

However, the numbers can also be somewhat misleading. First, the relatively larger proportion of women in education is probably due to male counterparts studying abroad or being forced in their roles as “breadwinners” to remain in the labor force.\textsuperscript{52} In the UAE, for example, women exceed men in university enrollment (39 to 12 percent), but nearly 80 percent of the population is made up of expatriate works (mostly men), who do not study, and the elite men often study

\textsuperscript{49} Yousef 2004, 101-2
\textsuperscript{50} World Bank, Gender and Development in the MENA region, 2003
\textsuperscript{51} Palestine Human Development Report
\textsuperscript{52} Palestine Human Development Report
Second, although the enrollment numbers at universities are very high, women represent only 28% of the labor force. The problem of job creation supplying roles to graduates is thus even more marked for women than for men. Finally, women’s access to education is also determined in large part by their social class, where rural or low-income women do not participate in the gains enjoyed by urban, elite women. For example, many young women drop out early from school due to early marriage.

In general, since Arab cultural systems obligate sons to provide financial support to the family, many MENA families still prefer investing in their sons’ education over their daughters. Women, by contrast, join their husband’s family upon marriage. Thus, some families may even regard money spent on a daughter’s education as a long-term loss, and women’s access to education is heavily determined by their social class, and their parents’ own academic achievements. Thus, Arab males, and to a lesser extent middle- and upper-class women, continue to be the primary beneficiaries of higher education in the MENA region.

**Preferential Admissions and Political Discrimination**

Countries of the MENA region have many unspoken policies and procedures that dominate the system. Often, the “policies” are systems of favoritism granted to domestic political constituencies, as well as to students from foreign countries which happen to be in favor that year. For example, among Palestinian academics, political affiliations of scholars determine which institutions are open to them. Hamas supporters go to one institution; Fatah to another. Palestinians abroad in Arab countries faced a different sort of discrimination, as some countries

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53 Christine Assaad, “Gender Equality in the United Arab Emirates: A Driver for Increased Competitiveness.” Dubai School of Government Policy Brief No. 5, (June 2008), 3

54 Harfoush-Strickland, 1992
offered them preferential admission, while others refused it. Palestinian students are also denied access to Israeli institutions.\textsuperscript{55} In the political systems across the region, supporters of the dominant regime may be granted access to the more elite institutions. In Tunisia, Syria, and Saddam’s Iraq, the state has often adopted a strategy to co-opt society by favoring political supporters. Often, particular towns and regions affiliated by the ruling elite are favored with development projects, including better educational systems.

In other countries, the discrimination may be less along political party lines than those of ethnicity or class. The elite higher education institutions in the Gulf discussed earlier are an example of educational quality being offered only to the wealthy elite of these countries, not to poor or immigrant populations.

Preferential admissions procedures are also becoming increasingly evident, albeit less directly through the “streaming” of students. All public institutions in the MENA region rely on a Baccalaureate, or General Secondary Education Certificate (“Tawjihi” in Arabic), to determine access to higher education. The Tawjihi system sends qualified students to universities, whereas other students move on to vocational or technical training. Performance on the exams, of course, is determined by the quality of education received at earlier stages, as well as by economic class. Thus, marginalized groups residing in rural areas are more likely to be denied access to higher educational, although raw ability may be the same as those in more fortunate and politically favored areas.

\textsuperscript{55} Kraft 2003
Public and Private Institutions

Worldwide, education has increasingly been provided by private institutions, using private funds, rather than by public means. The MENA region, with its history of public education, has resisted this trend to some degree, but the drift towards private education continues in MENA as well. Slow economic growth, the “youth bulge,” and the old policies of free tertiary education have combined to pull down the quality of many institutions of higher learning in the MENA region. The widening class divisions between elites and the rest of society have also led to increasing differentiation in education, particularly along lines of private versus public institutions.

Figure 3 / Table 1.12 below from The World Bank’s 2008 report shows the share of private enrollment at all levels of education. While the lack of data at the tertiary level is amply apparent from the chart, a tentative picture nevertheless emerges of a substantial share of enrollment going to private institutions. The mean level of 23.6 percent has substantial variation on either side: Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine enroll half their university students at private institutions; Tunisia and Morocco, by contrast, still rely largely on their public university systems.

### TABLE 1.12

**Private Enrollment Share in Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Education as a Percentage of Total Enrollment, 1980–2003**

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<td><strong>13.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>23.6</strong></td>
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</table>

**China**

**Indonesia**

**Korea, Rep. of**

**Malaysia**

**Philippines**

**Thailand**

**Mean**

**Argentina**

**Brazil**

**Chile**

**Mexico**

**Peru**

**Mean**

**Sources:** UNESCO Statistical Yearbooks, UNESCO Institute for Statistics through WB EdStats, Data Query System and Statistical Appendix.


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**FIGURE 3:** THE WORLD BANK, 2008 DATA
Private universities rank among the highest regarded in the region: to name just a few, the American Universities of Beirut, Cairo, and Sharjah, Birzeit and Al-Quds in the West Bank, the Islamic University of Gaza, and Al-Akhawayne of Morocco. Of course, private education at earlier stages is also sometimes of very high quality to those students lucky enough to receive it. French schools in the Maghreb, for instance, provide schooling on par with that received in Europe.57

From the perspective of Arab states, however, privatization may pose a threat to governmental control of standards, curriculum, and personnel recruitment58. Sultana argues that a trade-off may arise from privatization, where economic pressures are relaxed but socio-political pressures grow, as privatization comes to “reinforce and augment unequal access to the university”59. In other words, it is a drift to more unequal societies overall.

Foreign universities are augmenting the private-public gap, fueling in some cases a system of “brain drain,” and in others simply underscoring dramatic wealth discrepancies. Many Palestinians, for instance, faced with growing social and political difficulties, now pursue studies in Europe or the United States, as well as in other Arab countries (mainly Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon)60. In the Gulf States, satellite campuses of American and European universities also play into this disparity of access. Similarly, Gottlieb and Yakir note that Israeli academics in Israel are concerned that young Israelis are relying too much on education abroad.61

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57 Akkari, 151
58 Za’arour 1988; Zughoul 1999
59 Sultana 2001, 17
60 Gerner and Shrodt 1999; Graham-Brown 1984
61 Gottlieb and Yakir 1998
Conflict

Violent conflict typically comes with large costs to society, shifting state resources away from services like education to security, restricting free movement of the population, endangering vulnerable groups and minorities, and slowing investment (and with it long-term economic growth). For example, the Humanitarian Monitor, a UN publication, has found that poverty levels in Palestine have more than tripled since 1999 and the beginning of the second intifada—today, 66 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank lives in poverty, as do 79 percent in the Gaza Strip; since November 2001 the percentage of people living in poverty has increased an average of 16 percent in the occupied territories.\(^2\) Similarly grim figures have emerged from Iraq since 2003.

On the one hand, the portrait of the MENA region painted by the Western media is overly-focused on conflict to the exclusion of relevant stories unrelated to extremism or violence. To this end, it would be folly to examine the MENA region’s educational system solely or primarily through a conflict lens. That said, on the other hand, there can be no doubt that war, terrorism, and the political tensions across the region have played a key role in shaping MENA’s societies’ experience with and access to tertiary education.

Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine have all experienced substantial levels of violence in the last three years, some of it on-going or at risk of re-igniting. Two more countries, Yemen and Algeria, underwent difficult civil wars in the 1990s, while several others from Morocco to Egypt to Saudi Arabia to Iran have struggled with extremist and separatist groups inside their borders.

\(^2\) United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2006, 4
The implications for tertiary education in this situation should not be ignored. In 2005-2007, Iraqi university students suffered through a string of bombings and on-campus shootings. The uptick in social conservatism across Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War and increasing again substantially in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion, led to severe setbacks to Iraqi women’s access to tertiary education, which had been among the highest in the Arab world in decades prior. Similarly, Algerian women still face restrictions on their movement from extremist groups within the country, and for some it is not safe to travel at night or without a companion. This is an additional barrier to their educational access.

The conflict between Israel and its neighbors has profound implications for all parties involved. The 2006 Israeli bombardment of Lebanon and Hezbollah’s wave of rocket fire into Northern Israel shut down universities from Beirut to Haifa. With significant numbers of Lebanese killed in the attacks, some students—mostly poor, rural Shia—experienced significant economic setbacks, hindering their financial ability to pay for education.

In Palestine, the occupation from 1967-1993 led many students to forego education or, if possible, to study abroad at significantly higher financial cost. Israeli authorities implemented several restrictions on Palestinian universities, limiting construction of new facilities, barring access to libraries, and even shutting down universities for extended periods of time. The first Intifada, beginning in 1988, was met with a four-year closure of several institutions, for example.63 After a brief lull during the 1990s, the situation since 2000 has continued to deteriorate for students—and with them, civil society and the economy. According to MOHER,

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63 Watzman 1993
over three hundred schools and eight universities have been shelled, shot at, or raided and suffered other disruptions by the Israeli military.\textsuperscript{64}

International donors focusing on educational policy do not, in and of themselves, have the means resolve conflict. However, an analysis of equity in access to education would be incomplete or misleading without some consideration of the significant harm caused by war and occupation. When it comes to tertiary education, UNESCO has argued that universities cannot escape their role in promoting cultures of peace or conflict.\textsuperscript{65} Educational policy certainly should not exacerbate societal grievances by denying access on an equitable basis.

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

This report has hopefully helped to synthesize some of the existing research and knowledge regarding the MENA region and its educational systems. The following four major recommendations draw on the findings of this report and are all intended as actionable suggestions to serve as guidelines for future research.

At present, reports like this one, and the policy that might flow from it, are hampered by an absence of reliable, high-quality data about tertiary education in the MENA region. Thus, the first recommendation is as follows:

*International donors, organizations, and financial institutions should undertake or fund projects to collect and publish more systematic data about policy and practice in the MENA region.*

\textsuperscript{64} MOHER 2005

These data collection projects will best serve future policy making, and provide the most reliable and actionable information, if they focus on *de facto* practice on the ground. However, diplomatic engagement with MENA governments to encourage more transparency and disclosure in their educational policies would also be beneficial.

Second, *international donors should provide funds to support affirmative action programs for women and girls, as well as for young men and women from underrepresented groups (such as Sahrawis and Berbers in Algeria and Morocco, Bedouin around Sinai, or Arabs and Kurds in Iran) to study at the tertiary level, preferably at universities within their own countries.* While many MENA countries official maintain policies of free and universal education, societal and structural barriers prevent real equality in access from being achieved. Many international donors today offer scholarship programs for groups like these; however, these programs are often for studies abroad or in Western institutions\(^{66}\). While such programs is desirable from the perspective of increasing international mutual understanding, and they should be maintained, additional impact (particularly in terms of quantity of the population served) could be made by supporting local institutions, and this process would also help integrate societies more, rather than contributing to the problem of “brain drain” in the region.

Non-financial barriers to education in the MENA region will not be overcome strictly by affirmative action programs supporting admission to university along financial lines. They also require society-wide reforms. Thus, the third recommendation is that, among other economic and political reforms that could be made, *MENA governments should invest in programs to*

\(^{66}\) Joan Dassin, “Promoting Access and Equity in Post-Graduate Education: The Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program;” See also U.S. State Dept. Fulbright Program / AMIDEAST.
increase the quality of primary and secondary education in their rural areas. Such programs may include teacher training programs, funding to facilitate girls’ education at these levels, and/or youth after-school programs. By investing in improving quality at earlier stages of education, governments can help alleviate the non-financial barriers to access at the tertiary level. Investments at the secondary and primary school level are also generally less expensive than those at universities.

The fourth and final recommendation comes from the recognition that MENA societies, despite sharing many ties of culture and language, also work in profoundly different historical, regional, and national contexts. International educational development programs should design their projects on a country-by-country basis. Massive programs aimed at region-wide change have largely failed to achieve lasting success. Part of the problem has been the failure of some international donors to account for the different variables at play in different MENA countries. In particular, tight program designs should be strategic about their funding in the context of conflict. To the extent possible, donors should avoid funding programs which will exacerbate existing tensions, and they should provide supplemental funding to states and universities experiencing conflict to ensure that vulnerable groups, such as women or minorities, do not lose access to universities as a result of war.

Of these four recommendations, perhaps the most immediately pertinent in the context of this project is the first. Better information about educational practice in MENA countries will require

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67 The U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), for instance, has adopted a broad strategy which arguably has failed to achieve lasting results due to the lack of nuance in its policy analysis during the first years of the initiative. See Colin Powell. “The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative: Building Hope for the Years Ahead.” Heritage Lectures No. 772.
both investigation in-country, perhaps by local researchers at universities, as well as at the level of Ministries of Education, which will need to be engaged on a long-term basis.

Needless to say, these recommendations are not the only ones which could be drawn from the analysis of this report, nor from other reports like it. Indeed, a number of quality reports do exist on education in the MENA region, though they largely deal with access only indirectly or briefly, given the same constraints outlined here. The end pages of this report are an annotated bibliography of references consulted for this report and possible of use to policy makers and fellow researchers.

**Annotated Bibliography**

  
  • 15 pages. Identifies the Middle East region as “immune to the trends affecting other parts of the world,” and concludes that Arab regional economic integration cannot be spurred on.

  
  • 10 Pages. “This paper investigates the educational development in the Middle East and North Africa, drawing on data from different international and national institutions. The paper begins with a review of similarities between countries within the region, and continues by investigating the situation of basic education, literacy rates and quality of education. In the third section, issues of inequality between public and private education are discussed. The paper concludes by outlining future educational challenges in the region.”

Aleryani, Samir. “Improving the Quality of Higher Education in Yemen.” Presentation from April 7-8, 2007, Washington DC.
  
  • 15 slides. Argument for governments to provide greater academic freedom and for Ministries of Education to build capacity.

• 33 pages. Report from the conference held on September 21, 2003, remarks Delivered by Mr. Abdlatif Yousef Al-Hamad, with opening remarks by Jacques de Larosière and Sultan Al-Suwaidi.

Anderson, Lisa. Political Decay in the Arab World.
• 11 pages. Monograph on the trajectory of Arab states from the perspective of “azmatology,” or the study of crises, as well as reflection on the economic-political ascendance of Jordan and Morocco.

• 8 pages. “This brief recommends changes in labor policies [in UAE] to stimulate the economic inclusion of women, and calls for improvements in data collection, analysis and dissemination. With more accurate and timely information, a truer picture of gender equality in the UAE will emerge and policy solutions can be more effectively formulated.”

Balbir, Jagbans. Fifty Years of International Co-Operation for the Development of Higher Education.

• 2 pages. News article, per title, describing worldwide shift to private education.

• 33 Pages. An ethnography of Bedouin life in the contemporary MENA region.

Dassin, Joan. Promoting Access and equity in Post-Graduate Education: The Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program.
• 14 pages. Discusses the Ford Foundation’s International Fellowships Fund, which offers fellowships for graduate and post-graduate study to 3,325 students from developing countries. The program is aimed at “broadening access to and increasing equity in higher education.” A resource for rationales of higher education, and example of one donors’ program.

• 18 pages. Notes a “serious gap in the availability of basic economic and financial indicators.” Uses results of the most recent World Economic Forum’s Executive Opinion Survey to benchmark competitive performance of Arab countries against selected comparators.

- 7 pages. Liberal translation / summary of the Ministry of Education’s 2008 report, which includes discussion of university access programs.


- 19 pages. An excellent analysis and discussion of the evolution of Arab and Turkish universities from a cultural and historical perspective


- 5 pages. Speech delivered by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell on December 12, 2002. Outlines the MEPI program, which became an instrument of U.S. foreign policy shaping educational aid in the region.


- 28 pages. “Jordan’s policy of higher education since the 1970s has entailed a major socio-economic transformation with vital political ramifications. A non-official and un-transparent affirmative action policy in the universities including admission quotas, scholarships, tuition fees and nominations of faculty members, in addition to decentralization of academic institutions, overbalanced the rate of the tribal Transjordanian community of the rural periphery at the expense of the Palestinians, who mostly reside in the urban center.”


- 111 pages. Provides statistical information on demographics since 2000 and establishes “a broad overview and pinpoint[s] key trends in the region.” Many small tables and graphs with extensive information.


- 25 pages. Survey of education expenditure at different levels of schooling in the MENA countries. For each of the MENA countries, the unit costs at different levels of study and the familiar Gini coefficients indicating the equity in the distribution of resources among different levels of education are computed.


- 335 pages. An excellent resource on women and development in MENA. Part I: The Reform Process and Islamic Movements, Worsening Human Rights Violations in Arab Countries, Unfriendly International and Regional Environments. Part II: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World, The State of Women in the Arab World, The Use of

- 49 pages (in French). Present findings from the world conference on higher education and the debate surrounding the promotion of a culture of peace, including recommendations.


- 19 pages. Looking at Central Bureau of Statistics Data from 1985 to 1996, the paper looks at stratification in universities studies in Israel, noting that three elite universities differ from others. The latter have more older students, women, and minorities (Sephardic Jews and Arabs).

- 25 pages. “This essay reviews the development history of the Middle East and North Africa region in the post-World War II era, with a focus on issues that are especially relevant to current efforts for economic and political reform.”

- 60 pages. The quality of higher education in the Arab world has suffered because of the rapid growth of university systems. Despite popular demand, several Arab governments are questioning the wisdom of continuing to expand these systems.