Education Challenges In The Muslim World
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Nearly half of the population in the Middle East and North Africa is under the age of 24, and one in five is between the ages of 10 and 24. However, many countries in the region are in danger of squandering this vital human capital.

According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: “These adolescents and youths have the potential to become change-makers, by actively contributing to addressing the region's most pressing issues. But to unleash this potential, they need access to opportunities to learn and develop the skills needed to earn a dignified living.” Partly as a result of ongoing conflicts in the region, one in five children in the MENA region is not in school. Many of those who do attend school face the constant threat of disruption or worse; in 2015 UNICEF, the UN’s Children's Fund, reported that more than 8,850 educational facilities in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya had been attacked and destroyed.

Thanks to gender inequalities and poor standards of quality in many education systems, many of those who do receive an education “often find themselves unequipped with the skills sought after in the labor market, and unable to engage in meaningful and dignified work.”

Two-thirds of young people in the Levant who were questioned for the 2017 Arab Youth Survey said that they felt that the education system was not preparing them for their future.

According to UNESCO’s Generation 2030 report, published in 2019, compared with boys “adolescent girls are 1.5 times more likely to be out of school in lower secondary education in the region, and one in five girls in the region are married before the age of 18. For female youth, the unemployment rate is even higher, (with) more than two out of five in North Africa and more than one third in the Arab States unemployed.”

Overall youth-unemployment rates among 15-to-24-year-olds in MENA are the highest in the world, with estimates suggesting close to a third of those in North Africa and more than one in five in Arab States were unemployed in 2018.
INTRODUCTION

This report focuses primarily on weaknesses in the provision of education across the MENA region. As noted above, there are systemic problems. Some can be traced to enduring conflicts and state collapse, such as in Yemen and Libya, or the decision to deny education to those living in regions outside state control, such as in Syria.

However, the underlying problem is more widespread. Typically, the amount states in the region spend on education as a proportion of their gross domestic product is broadly similar, but the educational outcomes are low based on almost every indicator.

In a region dominated by a young population, the quality of education is of paramount importance. Yet even in places where they have access to sufficient schooling, young people often complete formal education ill-equipped to enter the professions that characterize a modern economy.

Gender discrimination is part of the problem as girls are less likely than boys to complete the schooling process, but it is not the only cause. In many states, more women than men enter higher education but they still find themselves severely constrained as to the type of work they can undertake after graduation.

Traditionally, jobs in healthcare or education were seen as acceptable options for women in the region, but this view is severely limiting at a time when many regional economies are trying to shift from being state controlled, and funded largely by petrochemical revenues, to a more open, entrepreneurial model.

Many of the studies and reports on education across the MENA region point to a need for curricula reforms and increased private-sector provision. However, there is limited evidence that private provision can improve the situation as long as there remains a shortage of suitably trained — and rewarded — teachers. In this respect, a review of the Turkish experience is informative.

Education in Turkey has many of the problems identified in the MENA region, especially a high degree of centralized control, a lack of funding and a tendency to stress the role of education as supporting the societal consensus rather than facilitating learning.

However, despite absorbing many Syrian refugees, and the tensions in the east of the country caused by civil conflict with the Kurdish minority, Turkey has, broadly speaking, much better educational outcomes than MENA states. One critical difference that might help to explain this is the Turkish commitment to high-quality teacher training and ensuring that teachers are relatively well paid.

This suggests that while issues surrounding the content of curricula, the problems of disrupted schooling and the structure of the education system are all important factors, it is a mistake to focus only on them. The Turkish experience suggests that the quality, and numbers, of teachers can at least partially offset such weaknesses.

If so, a key recommendation is for MENA states to focus on teacher training and recruitment. Inevitably, this is a relatively slow process, but a focus only on educational structures and the divide between state and private provision will not make any sustained difference as long as the necessary teaching cadres are missing.
BACKGROUND

IMPACT OF ISLAM
Islam has a long tradition of valuing education and the contribution of the well-educated to their societies. As such, regional weaknesses are not the result of faith but of public-policy choices.

Clearly there are some non-orthodox interpretations of the Muslim faith that either deny women access to education or limit the scope for them to move from education into employment, and where these are dominant there are particular problems to address.

Most often it is the transition from education to work that is problematic for women, especially given that in many states their career options traditionally have been limited to a few sectors, such as health or education.

A key finding of this report is that Islam, as such, is neither a benefit nor a hindrance to educational quality; instead it is a matter of public policy and public administration.

MUSLIM MAJORITY COUNTRIES
This section considers the educational experiences of Muslims who live in Muslim majority countries, and those who live in other parts of the world. The former focuses on the MENA region, which includes the bulk of the global Muslim population and is an area with significant weaknesses.

However, the experiences in Turkey, Pakistan and Bangladesh are also explored as these provide some interesting insights into potentially useful reforms and what can be done to improve outcomes.

Middle East and North Africa
The majority of the Muslim population in Muslim majority countries lives in states in the Middle East and North Africa. It is worth noting that Christian confessional states in the region face similar problems. To some extent, this points to regional and historical problems being a key factor in poor educational outcomes, rather than religious faith.

Reports have consistently argued that the quality of educational outcomes is low even when adequate resources are available. This is a consistent finding despite the considerable variations in wealth, infrastructure and historical experiences among states across the wider region.

This has been a concern for some time, even though reliable comparative data is often lacking. Nevertheless, the available data would suggest the quality of education is generally low. The cause of the problem is not scarcity of financial resources, however, but the inefficient management of allocated resources.

Generally speaking, national variations in expenditure on education are in line with variations in GDP. But taken as a whole, the region suffers from low rates of literacy, a pedagogic approach that is still dominated by rote learning and memorization, and teachers that are relatively poorly trained. All of this leaves students ill-equipped to function in modern, knowledge-based economies.

There have been significant gaps in curricula at primary and secondary levels, especially in terms of mathematics and literacy, leaving many young people unqualified for jobs that require basic numeracy and communication skills.

The effects of all this are stark. While the average global adult literacy rate is 86 percent, UNESCO found that only 75 percent of the population in Arabic regions can read and write. This figure is actually a significant improvement since the 1970s but still, given the relatively young population in MENA states, the literacy rate should be much higher, as it is usually older age groups who missed out on basic primary education.

In this context, investment in education was part of the state-building process. It reflected a desire among fledgling states to do better than previous colonial rulers had, and also a conscious decision to allocate some of the new-found wealth generated by oil to social systems. In effect, these systems, for good
and bad, had their origins in an era of central economic planning11.

At a state level, an important goal was to encourage what were often disparate populations to accept their new state borders, and many authorities pushed a form of nationalist orthodoxy as a means to this end. If education had a wider objective, it was often to train a new generation to run the administrative demands of their new state12.

However, this created two problems that are endemic and seem to be at the root of many of the current problems. To give an example, the system in Tunisia has become defined by “two features: centralization and weak rule of law”13. The practical consequence of this is that a notionally universalist education system is in fact one in which relative wealth and existing connections determine the quality of education.

The result is an education system that is dominated by patronage, with implications both for what is taught and the willingness to embrace reforms14, and in which acquiring notional qualifications is necessary for entry to employment15.

In effect, employment opportunities can be a reflection of personal background, and the progression from education to work is a product of passing specific tests rather than the acquisition of knowledge and a commitment to ongoing learning, which is what is needed as economic systems change and modernize.

AREAS FOR CHANGE
The need for change covers three main areas:

1. Pedagogy
This relates to the pedagogy, or approach to teaching, the subjects that are taught, and the basic structures of primary and secondary school systems. Reforming pedagogical approaches is a relatively long-term process, not least because it is important that states seek to train their own domestic workforces rather than rely on the outputs of other states.

Practical options include: reforms of examinations, textbooks and classroom teaching; a shift in textbook production away from state monopolies; a professionalized teaching force that is rewarded with higher salaries and subject to mandatory re-licensing; the creative financing and provision of higher education; and significant improvements in the monitoring of education statistics and indicators of progress16.

2. Curricula
Curricula in the region remain focused on social sciences and humanities. The problem is not that this is wrong, as such, but more emphasis must be placed on science and mathematics, not least because most states are trying to reduce their reliance on public administration to provide work for their citizens, and encourage them to take up jobs in industry and the wider private sector17.

In this respect, the current bias in both secondary and tertiary education means there is a lack of students with the skills needed as regional economies start to reform.

3. Governance and Structures
A common view among many outside reports is the need to push for more privatization within the schooling system18. What is less clear is how moving away from a state-funded system, with free access, would address the existing problems of a lack of a suitable workforce in the teaching profession, and of a system warped by patronage and connections.

A more-fragmented system that includes greater numbers of private providers will not create the expanded workforce that is clearly needed and there is no reason to believe it would be any less vulnerable to patronage.

The private-education sector is already rapidly expanding in some places. The UAE, for example, has the highest proportion in the world of students in private schools, 70 percent, and there was also a rapid expansion in Saudi Arabia between 2007 and 201719.

So far, however, this shift in the model for provision of teaching has failed to address the problems in terms of educational outcomes.

GAPS IN PROVISION
Gaps in provision, and ensuring students can access the education to which they are entitled, are major problems. Studies suggest that about 67 percent of young people in the Levant feel that they are not being taught enough.

Women, in particular, remain vulnerable to such partial exclusion from education. Across the MENA region the illiteracy rate among females is 42 percent, compared with 22 percent among male counterparts20. Gaps in
school attendance, allied to the quality of the education on offer, are among the reasons for high rates of youth unemployment across the region.

Many of the problems affecting primary and secondary education are repeated in the tertiary sector. Across the region, higher education is marked both by high drop-out rates and high levels of post-graduation unemployment; about 40 percent of university graduates do not have a job.

Women in particular, most of whom are better educated than their male counterparts, experience significant problems when they try to enter the labor force.

In terms of curricula, there is an even greater imbalance in higher education than in schools between the subjects most commonly studied and the needs of slowly reforming economies.

It is not as if structured higher education is a new concept in the region; the University of Al-Karaouine in Fez, Morocco, first offered degrees in the year 859.

But as with schools, universities were seen during the early post-colonial era as important symbols of prestige, used to underpin the chosen ideologies of new regimes. This did not encourage innovation or quality and, again, despite real investment, outcomes have been limited.

Even now, state-building remains a key aspect of the system even if the nationalist, often socialist, ideologies of the 1950s and 1960s have been replaced. Egypt, for example, is now emphasizing the state and the nation-building roles of the military. Tribal histories assume an equivalent role in many Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

A further problem has been recruiting the highly trained professionals required to staff university systems. Early on, many states relied on those who had been expelled from other regimes, a divide that reflected the split between socialist and Islamist states.

**EFFECTS OF COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has made many of these problems much worse. An estimated 100 million students between the ages of 5 and 17 stopped attending school in the past two years. The effects of this have been felt around the world but are worse in regions where many homes lack access to computer equipment and the internet, and so the capacity to create an online learning environment was limited.

In the MENA region, children who were...
already vulnerable to disengagement from formal schooling have increasingly experienced the fragmentation and disruption of their education. Managing this challenge has not been easy for any countries, but those that were more able to create a structured home-learning environment and ensure children can safely return to education have fared better.

Finally, in a number of states, including Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen, ongoing conflicts have effectively halted structured education for many. In these countries schools have been destroyed and staff dispersed, and as a result about 14.3 million children can no longer attend classes.

Clearly this is not primarily an educational problem but reliance on ad-hoc education is a major issue for those who have been displaced by conflict. Even states that do not face the problems of nationwide conflict can experience localized problems in particular regions, or among specific ethnic communities.

Conflict is therefore a serious issue across the MENA region and adds to the problems involved in ensuring that all children have access to regular, structured education.

**TURKEY**

The Turkish education system shares some characteristics of the systems found in MENA states. There has been a degree of nation building embedded in curricula since the 1920s, for example, and it is a highly centralized system, with a central ministry responsible for staffing, budgetary and pedagogic issues, although there are now a number of private schools outside the formal state system.

Despite this, schools in Turkey remain highly dependent on locally raised, private income to fund much of their expenditure. Recently, the focus has fallen on improving access to education in rural areas and, more generally, on improving quality.

Since 2012, education has been mandatory in Turkey up to the age of about 16. Access to further education is mediated through a national test, although some schools also employ their own entrance exams. Unlike the situation in, say, Tunisia, this test is mostly viewed as being fair and transparent. Nevertheless, it clearly favors students from better-off families who can afford extra tuition, and private tutoring schools are common in most cities and larger towns.

Critically, Turkey, unlike many MENA
states, has a large and relatively well-trained cadre of teachers who are relatively well paid. In addition, the profession is broadly split fairly equally between men and women. In many MENA states, on the other hand, women tend to predominate, in part because, as noted earlier, teaching was traditionally viewed as one of the few acceptable jobs for them.

In the main, the Turkish system is equitable, although there are still significant differences in the experience based on family background. The curriculum is up to date and better aligned to the needs of the nation’s economy. And to its credit, Turkey has also done its best to provide refugees from Syria with some access to structured education.

BANGLADESH
Most studies note that Bangladesh has made significant strides in terms of ensuring access to primary education, including among rural communities and by achieving high rates of female participation, and generally ensuring that children complete at least a basic education.

The exception to this high rate of participation can be found among children in the major urban slums, who are proving hard to reach and embed into the school system, especially as they are often expected to work to help support their families.

However, the success in terms of participation is undermined by the poor quality of the education provided. Many children who complete their primary education are functionally illiterate, and the progression to secondary and tertiary education is correspondingly low. This situation is made worse by the fact that there is very little chance to return to education later in life. The basic problems the country faces are a lack of trained teachers, poor pedagogic practice, and the overall rates of rural and urban poverty.

PAKISTAN
In theory the education system in Pakistan mandates compulsory schooling up to the age of 16, and in recent years the education budget has increased substantially.

In rural areas in particular, however, many children do not attend school on a regular basis, because they are often withdrawn so that they can work and help contribute to family finances. Even when they do attend classes, schools are under-resourced and teachers are not always available. The practical challenges are exacerbated by having to cope with a large population of refugees in the northwest of the country, and low-level civil unrest in the southwest.

UNICEF estimates that 44 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 16 are out of school. Girls are especially vulnerable to being excluded and there are significant regional differences as well. In Balochistan, almost 80 percent of girls are not in school. The overall effect of this is that almost 75 percent of women in the province have had no schooling at all.

As is the case in the MENA region, the key issue for Pakistani authorities is not especially the budget allocated to education but the delivery of that education. Equally, and unlike the MENA experience, there is evidence that suggests the private-school network in Pakistan is more successful than public schools. By one estimate, the expenditure per child in private schools is half that of the state sector and yet the students in the former are two grades ahead of their peers in the latter.

However, the effectiveness of this private sector, which has mostly developed to fill gaps in the public sector, is contested because “while attempting to fill a critical gap, these schools may be compromised by poorly qualified and badly paid teachers, idiosyncratic curricula, and a lack of government quality assurance and oversight.”

The current Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government is taking some steps in an effort to improve the situation. In particular it is establishing a structured curriculum and trying to improve the quality of textbooks. The hope is that this will address some of the problems of extreme variability in the quality of teaching materials — but this, in itself, will not address the larger problem of many students not attending schools.

OTHER MUSLIM COMMUNITIES
While there are some localized differences, in the main the experiences of Muslim-minority communities in North America and Western Europe are broadly similar. Countries in these regions tend to value education both in itself...
and as a tool for individual betterment. As a result, in the main, Muslim communities are better educated than the norm and well represented in higher education.

However, there is strong evidence to suggest that their transition to work is impeded by discrimination, either on ethnic or religious grounds.

This is not to say that there are not subsections of wider Muslim communities that fail to engage with the educational opportunities on offer, but in the main the key problem is navigating entry and progression within labor markets.

The experience of students in non-Muslim majority countries points to an important finding: While it is clear that the effectiveness of education in many Muslim majority countries is limited, for the most part it is not the result of any lack of aspiration or commitment from young people or their parents. In effect, as argued in the introduction to this document, it is largely a problem of governance in Muslim majority countries and not a problem associated with Islam itself.

**SUMMARY**

This report has focused chiefly on education systems in the MENA region, which includes the bulk of the global Muslim community. These systems are consistently marked by poor outcomes, despite levels of investment matching what might be expected based on GDP.

For comparison purposes, the situations in Turkey and Bangladesh were briefly discussed. This starts to put some of the issues in the MENA region into context.

As is the case in MENA states, the Turkish education system is highly centralized, education is very much used as a state-building tool, there is an increasing politicization of the workforce, there are weaknesses in rural provision, and stresses caused by ongoing low-level conflicts and refugee flows.

However, the outcomes are substantially different; broadly speaking, MENA states do not achieve the educational outcomes that might be expected based on their levels of investment in the sector but Turkey does.

The experiences of Pakistan and Bangladesh indicate there are some very specific factors at play. Both of these countries notionally mandate compulsory schooling to the age of 16 but are plagued by widespread absenteeism. Both are committed to education, have introduced significant reforms and raised budgetary allocations but, as in MENA, the outcomes do not match the fiscal allocation. In Pakistan, one major issue is the exclusion of girls from schooling, especially in rural areas. In addition, both countries are coping with large-scale refugee crises and doing their best to provide some level of education for children who fled across their borders to escape violence.

While country-specific issues are important, however, the experiences in Bangladesh and Pakistan reinforce the argument that even in regions such as the GCC area, which have relatively mature governance systems and limited levels of civil strife, education policy is producing poor results.

The variable effects of private education suggests it is not the solution it is sometimes claimed to be and, in isolation, is unlikely to substantially alter the underlying dynamics.

If there is a single major difference in approaches to be noted, it is in the recruitment and training process for the teaching profession and the incentives that are offered. Turkey, for example, has invested heavily in training its teaching cadre, which is relatively well paid and has clearly defined career paths.

Many MENA states have sought to take short cuts, relying on teachers imported from other countries and not really investing in the profession domestically. Clearly any attempt to change this will not be a quick solution, as there is a need first to create the higher-education infrastructure required to produce such a cadre. Beyond this, there is a clear need for curricula reform and, in particular, a greater focus on the teaching of numeracy.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Each of the regions and states considered in this report face slightly different problems in the delivery of education. What is consistent is that despite notionally robust legal requirements, and funding at comparable levels that might be expected based on GDP, the reality in many countries is that a lot of children are not in full time education, or indeed not in structured education at all, and overall educational results are poor. What can be done to change this?
Where gender-related differences exist, they need to be addressed. Of the countries covered in this report, this is particularly important in Pakistan, where it remains a problem despite recent efforts by the PTI government to address the situation.

A related issue is that in wealthier states, women are more likely than men to pursue higher education but often still face barriers when it comes to entering work force after graduation.

Most states in the region host large refugee populations and many do their best to support them. However, refugee children are exceptionally vulnerable to the threat of losing all access to education, which adds to the long-term challenges they face. So far as possible, they should be brought into mainstream education systems, with some allowances made for the wishes of their own community in terms of language of instruction and a desire to eventually return to their countries of origin.

Privatization of the schooling system is not the ready-made solution it is sometimes made out to be. It might be a useful way of expanding provision cheaply, but there is no particular reason to believe it can address the fundamental problems affecting education across the region. This leads to the core finding and recommendation of this report. Drawing on the experience of Turkey:

The solution lies in the quantity and quality of teacher training that is provided. Too many states have tried to deal with shortages by bringing in teachers from other countries. This is sometimes essential but, in the end, does not solve the underlying problem.

A related point is that the pay and career-development opportunities offered to teachers matter. This suggests that there is no short-term fix. There is plenty that can be done to address issues such as access to schooling, curricula, the quality of learning materials and gender imbalances, and addressing these issues will certainly improve outcomes.

However, the true key to a sustained improvement in the quality of education is not the structure of an education system; the key, quite simply, is the quality of the professionals working within that structure.
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