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HOUSES OF WISDOM MATTER:
THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT AND REBUILD HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

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B | Foreign Policy
at BROOKINGS

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Introduction

Higher education is often an unrecognized casualty of war. Over the past few years, it has increasingly found itself caught in the crossfire of spreading regional conflicts in the Arab world with deadly clampdowns on student protestors in Egypt, the bombing of campuses in Syria and Gaza, and the closure of universities in Libya and Yemen. The severe toll that regional conflicts have taken on higher education is further compounded by a failure to appreciate the strategic role of the sector in stabilizing and promoting the recovery of war-torn communities and states.

This paper argues that higher education, properly supported, is able to act as a catalyst for the recovery of war-torn countries in the Arab world, not only by supplying the skills and knowledge needed to reconstruct shattered economic and physical infrastructure, but also by supporting the restoration of collapsed governance systems and fostering social cohesion. As home to the strategically vital 18-25 age group, higher education can help shelter and protect an important subset of young men and women during crisis situations, maintaining their hopes in the future and preventing them from being driven into the hands of violent groups. For these reasons, it is high time that Arab states and the international community accept their collective responsibility to protect higher education during conflict and rebuild shattered institutions in its aftermath.

Arab Higher Education in Peace and War

The Arab world was responsible for some of the earliest institutions of higher education, which,

as great centers of learning, played a leading role in the advancement of many fields of knowledge, chiefly mathematics, science, and literature.[2] Universities such as al-Zitounah in Tunis (est. 734) and al-Qarawiyyin in Fes (est. 859) were established long before Bologna, the first European university (est. 1088). They become known for their progressive attitude and tolerance, serving as a meeting place for different schools of thought that contributed to the understanding of "the other" and as such played an important role in the dissemination of ideas across the Mediterranean and beyond.

Unfortunately, since this "Golden Age" of advanced learning and scholarship the record of higher education in the region has been mixed in terms of its contribution to the advancement of knowledge and societies. On the one hand, universities of then-newly independent Arab nations of the 1950s played an important role in producing elite graduates with the advanced skills necessary for implementing ambitious modernization and industrialization strategies. Through the 1980s, higher education, although limited in scope, was seen as a critical part of the nation-building toolkit available to the post-colonial state. University education became a primary means of opening up opportunities for the broader population, integrating rural and working classes into national projects, and strengthening the polity of the state. In cases ranging across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, universities (both students and staff) made important contributions to advancing powerful ideologies and political movements across the Arab World, such as pan-Arabism, socialism, and Islamism, by offering the political space for debating new ideas and providing the

intellectual leadership behind the development of civil society.[3]

On the other hand, since the 1990s higher education has in some ways regressed across the region, both in terms of its overall contribution to knowledge creation as well as to nation-building. At the same time, the region witnessed a rapid expansion in the number of universities and enrollment levels, propelled by market liberalization strategies (inviting private, for-profit capital into the sector). Ultimately, higher education systems have become focused on and driven by quantity rather than quality and teaching rather than research. The failure of quantitative expansion to fuel improvements in quality prompted the claim that "no region in the world has invested more in education with less to show for it."[4] As an indicator of this, only one Arab university was ranked in the top 400 of the 2014-2015 *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings.[5] This in a region that is home to 370 million people distributed across 22 states with one-third of global oil reserves and almost 400 universities.

Of course, this decline has not gone unnoticed by policy makers, and since the early 2000s some Arab states have launched ambitious strategies to reform higher education and reposition it at the heart of sustainable development strategies, driven by the desire to diversify their economies and boost knowledge production.[6] In the Gulf states, massive public funds were invested in higher education to produce domestic skill sets capable of managing post-oil transitions.[7] For instance, a reform and investment program launched by Saudi Arabia in 2007 aimed at building world-class universities.[8]

Meanwhile, in Syria, major economic and educational changes beginning in 2000 aimed to increase tertiary enrollment and set in motion ambitious higher education reforms.[9] Similarly, Libya launched a $6 billion scheme in 2006 then described as the "world's largest university building program" with the goal of building a high-tech knowledge economy.[10] As Iraq emerged from the U.S. occupation and years of sanctions, it announced the Iraq Education Initiative in 2009, pledging $1 billion toward investment in overseas scholarships and university reforms.

With the advent of the Arab Spring in 2010 and the important role students and university campuses played in mobilizing public opinion, there was hope that a new space for increased academic freedom in the region could accelerate these openings to ensure that higher education could contribute not just economic growth, but also to social and political change.[11] This phase of optimism has now largely dissipated as Syria's brutal civil war, the descent of post-Qaddafi Libya into violence and division, the takeover of Sanaa by Houthi rebels, the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, and the spread of the Islamic State group (IS) in Iraq and Syria have shifted global attention to the containment of the fallout from regional conflict.

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[3] Donald Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Betty S. Anderson, *The American University of Beirut: Arab Nationalism and Liberal Education* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Nancy Jabbra and Joseph Jabbra, "Education and Political Development in the Middle East," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 19, no. 3-4 (1984), 202-218.

[4] Djavad Salehi-Isfahani and Navtej Dhillon, "Stalled Youth Transitions in the Middle East: A Framework for Policy Reform," Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper no. 8, Wolfensohn Center for Development: Dubai School of Government, October 2008.

[5] This is the University of Marrakech Cadi Ayyad. "World University Rankings 2014-2015," *Times Higher Education*, <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2014-15/world-ranking> (7 June 2015).

[6] Ahmad Galal and Taher Kanaan, eds., *Financing Higher Education in Arab Countries* (Cairo: The Economic Research Forum, 2010).

[7] Christopher Davidson and Peter Mackenzie Smith, eds., *Higher Education in the Gulf States: Shaping Economies, Politics and Culture* (London: SAQI Books/London Middle East Institute, 2008).

[8] Abdulhalem Mazi and Philip Altbach, "Dreams and Realities: The World-Class Idea and Saudi Arabian Higher Education," in *Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities*, eds. Larry Smith and Abdulrahman Abouammoh (New York: Springer, 2013).

[9] Elizabeth Buckner and Khuloud Saba, "Syria's Next Generation: Youth Un/employment, Education, and Exclusion," *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues* 3, no.2 (2010) 86-98.

[10] Sophie Evans, "Building a Domestic Skills Base," *MEED: Middle East Economic Digest* 53, no. 35, (August 2009), 33.

[11] Bothina Osama, "Promise for Science after the Arab Spring," *SciDev Net*, 13 December 2012, <http://www.scidev.net/global/communication/editorials/promise-for-science-after-the-arab-spring-1.html>; Jonathon Fanton, "Tunisia: Inspiring Possibilities for Academic Freedom and Strong Universities" (address at conference in University of Manduoba, Tunisia, "The University and the Nation: Safeguarding Higher Education in Tunisia and Beyond," 20-21 February 2013).

Tragically, higher education is now caught in the crossfire of the conflicts that have engulfed the Middle East. The impact of conflict in the region can be detected in all the major dimensions of higher education: physical, human, institutional, and social. Higher education institutions, communities, and systems decades in the making have been shattered by war. Despite the fact that rebuilding a depleted higher education system is a complex and expensive task in the aftermath of conflict, little or no attempt has been made to protect these institutions from such harm.

The physical costs alone can be crippling. Campuses throughout the region have been directly attacked or indirectly damaged, either by virtue of their facilities being vulnerable to capture by armed groups or by virtue of claims that campuses are being used to shelter fighters or store weapons. Fighting raged on several campuses during the 2011 Libyan civil war, while in Yemen in 2015 Houthi forces captured and looted Iman University and Saudi airstrikes severely damaged Hodeidah University.[12] Since the 2014 IS takeover of parts of Iraq, Tikrit University has been damaged during intense fighting with Iraqi forces.[13] The bombing of the Islamic University in Gaza by the Israeli military in 2008, causing $55 million worth of damages, was one of the most documented attacks on higher education in the Middle East.[14] The rebuilt university was *again* targeted in 2014 alongside 13 other local higher education institutions, at an estimated cost of $16 million.[15]

Beyond this infrastructural damage, higher education in the region has also paid a very high human cost for being caught in the crossfire. The most appalling case of targeting higher education has been in post-2003 Iraq, with over 500 academics assassinated in the past 12 years. Direct attacks against higher education in the past several years also include the January 2013 bombing of Aleppo University that killed over 80 students; the 15 students killed in the March 2013 mortar attack on Damascus University; the deadly policing of student protests in Egypt, reportedly leading to over 150 deaths; and the July 2014 Israeli army assault on Gaza that killed a total of 421 students and injured another 1,128.[16]

The forced displacement of higher education communities is another form of human loss with a long term impact on the sector's quality. The Arab region has suffered some of the worst forced displacement episodes in recent history, affecting academics disproportionately. A major exodus of academics occurred in Iraq following the spike in sectarian violence in 2005, when several thousand highly experienced Iraqi academics fled the country with disastrous effects on educational quality. Some have since returned, yet many were uprooted again by IS's advance. Meanwhile, the Syrian civil war has triggered the largest academic displacement crisis in the world with an estimated 70,000 university students displaced in Lebanon,[17] 20-30,000 "university-qualified" students in Turkey,[18] and at least 15,000 in Jordan.[19] This

[12] Faisel Daram, "Yemen's Students Idled By Saudi Airstrikes," *Al Fanar Media*, 18 April 2015, <http://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2015/04/yemens-students-idle-as-air-attacks-continue/>.

[13] Kira Walker, "Islamic State Plunges Research in Iraq into Darkness," *Nature Middle East*, 25 September 2015, <http://www.natureasia.com/en/nmiddleeast/article/10.1038/nmiddleeast.2014.238>; Gilgamesh Nabeel, "Islamic State Advance in Iraq Closes Eight Universities," *Al Fanar Media*, 22 August 2014, <http://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2014/08/islamic-state-advance-iraq-closes-eight-universities/>.

[14] United Nations Development Programme, "One Year After Report: Gaza Early Recovery and Reconstruction Needs Assessment," May 2010, <http://www.undp.ps/en/newsroom/publications/pdf/other/gazaoneyear.pdf>; "The Palestinian National Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan for Gaza, 2009-2010" (paper presented at the International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Economy for the Reconstruction of Gaza, Sharm El-Sheikh, Arab Republic of Egypt, 2 March 2009).

[15] "Rapid Assessment of Higher Education Institutions in Gaza: Data Analysis Report," United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization and Enabling Education Network CIC, January 2015.

[16] Wagdy Sawahel, "Call to Support Academic Freedom in Universities," *University World News*, 25 April 2014, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20140424174801968>; "Rapid Assessment of Higher Education Institutions in Gaza."

[17] Keith Watenpaugh, Adrienne Fricke and James King, "The War Follows Them: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Lebanon," Institute of International Education and UC Davis, 2014.

[18] Keith Watenpaugh, Adrienne Fricke, and James King, "We Will Stop Here and Go No Further: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Turkey," Institute of International Education and UC Davis, 2014.

[19] See annex three of European Commission, "Commission Implementing Decision of 4.12.2014: On the 2014 special measure in favour of Jordan for the Syria crisis to be financed from the general budget of the European Union," 2014.

crisis has created a situation in which many university-age Syrians roam the streets of refugee camps and urban centers with nothing to do, risking the creation of a "lost generation."[20]

Conflict in the Middle East has also weakened and distorted the institutional basis of higher education. During wartime, money and attention are unsurprisingly diverted toward security at the expense of other national institutions and services. Higher education stands little chance in competing for resources, leading to the erosion, or in some cases the total collapse, of public higher education institutions and the closure or flight of private institutions. Even in situations where governments continue to finance higher education institutions despite conflicts, these institutions are likely to become increasingly isolated from the outside world. In Iraq, over a decade of war and economic blockades cut academia off from international exchanges of knowledge and resources. This point underscores the importance of the global higher education community maintaining contact with academia in crisis-affected contexts to help maintain a minimum level of intellectual vibrancy.

PROTECTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Over the past decade or so, violent attacks on schools and primary education have rightfully received significant global attention. The same cannot be said for higher education. With the exception of some limited advocacy efforts, by organizations such as the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, the matter of protecting higher education has yet to make it to the international arena. Meanwhile, the April 2015 assault on Garissa University College in Kenya has provided yet another somber reminder of just how vulnerable higher education institutions are to determined acts of terrorism.

The protection of higher education in the Middle East could be strengthened through the widespread acceptance of seven principles:

- The recognition of resilience;

- Strengthening legal standards of protection;

- Improving negotiations with state and non-state armed actors;

- Creating an international architecture for monitoring, reporting, and solidarity;

- Improving the physical means of protection;

- Fostering social cohesion through higher education;

- Shifting to a more regional approach.

Resilience

In principle, higher education institutions should come under the general rules of civilian infrastructure protection in times of war. That of course does not guarantee they will operate normally. In fact, given the social upheaval created by conflict it is inevitable that the functioning of higher education will be interrupted. What is amazing, however, is the degree of resilience many institutions demonstrate around the world by continuing to operate despite their proximity to conflict zones. Life does not stop during conflicts, and many young people under hardship continue to show considerable commitment to continuing their educations. This, for instance, includes the Palestinian academics and students who have established a university system and strived to maintain their academic life despite the draconian measures of a military occupation that has lasted almost half a century, as well as the Iraqi scholars who have braved death threats, harassment, and intimidation to deliver lectures.[21] This concept of resilience is at the core of explaining how the culture of higher education in war-torn communities in the Middle East has survived despite the harsh circumstances and heavy losses incurred.

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[20] Benjamin Plackett, "Efforts to Help Syria's 'Lost Generation' Disappointing So Far," *Al Fanar Media*, 29 September 2014.
[21] Gabi Baramki, *Peaceful Resistance: Building a Palestinian University under Occupation* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

Stronger Legal Protections

That resilience can do little, however, in the face of direct targeting of campuses, their use by militants to house fighters and weapons, or their unfortunate proximity to military installations. Given the value and vulnerability of higher education, there is a need for states to explicitly enshrine respect for institutional autonomy and protection during times of war.[22] Therefore, strengthening national and international legal standards prohibiting the military use and abuse of higher education is the second principle of protection.

Significant efforts have already been made in this direction. The Lucens Guidelines offer a foundational document outlining legal, military, and diplomatic measures to protect education.[23] Even though they do not distinguish between schools and universities, the Lucens Guidelines can still be used as a stepping stone to develop better-targeted protection measures. The *Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack* provide a statement of sector-specific principles incumbent on states, including a commitment to protection, assisting victims, and holding perpetrators accountable.[24] Further work is necessary to develop more detailed, evidence-based standards, and to adapt these to the specific challenges faced by higher education in the Middle East.

Negotiating with Armed Actors

The nature of conflict in the Middle East today is such that it is hardly ever between two regular armies representing states that are signatories to international conventions. The involvement of irregular militant groups, along with the context of state fragility in which they generally operate, means that effective protection is often not driven by "respect of law," but by people's ability (often college or university principals) to negotiate a neutral space for their own protection. Given the sectarian aspect of many of the conflicts in the Arab world today, the size and effectiveness of that space may rely on settlements that compromise part of the ethos of higher education (such as segregated education), but allows its continued functioning. As such, improving negotiations with armed forces and groups becomes the third principle of protection.

Networks of Solidarity

Little is known, however, about which higher education institutions are being subjected to adverse circumstances. This can only be remedied through the creation of a universal higher education architecture for monitoring and reporting of attacks on institutions or their academic communities.[25] Therefore, monitoring, reporting, and solidarity is the fourth principle of protection.

Physical Protection

The fifth principle is a commitment to improving the physical means of protection. This would commonly include increasing campus security as well as offering physical protection (usually through extraction from the country) to faculty and students most under threat. This is by far the most developed area of international response, particularly in the Arab world where the protection of higher education has primarily taken the form of protective infrastructure, social reorganization, and efforts to rescue displaced scholars and students.

These measures present policy makers with the dilemma of balancing the need for protection against the need to maintain access and a culture of openness. In the aftermath of attacks on higher education in Iraq, Syria, and

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[22] Amy Kamit, Jodut Hashmi, and Robert Quinn, "Institutional Autonomy and the Protection of Higher Education from Attack," Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), December 2013.

[23] GCPEA, "Draft Lucens Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict," October 2014.

[24] GCPEA, "Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict," <http://www.protectingeducation.org/guidelines> (7 June 2015).

[25] Mario Novelli and Ervjola Selenica, "Protecting Higher Education from Attack," in *Education Under Attack* 2014, GCPEA, 2014; "Draft Lucens Guidelines."

elsewhere, the temptation has been to address the security dilemma by erecting barriers—both physically and metaphorically—between the university and society. Physical security measures were deemed necessary to protect the campus and to create the required conducive atmosphere for their academic operation. For instance, at al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, a 12-foot blast wall was reportedly constructed in response to intense violence in 2007. While similar measures may be necessary in the short-term, caution should be exercised to avoid creating academic fortresses sealed off from the outside by security forces, concrete barriers, and a defensive mentality. Maintained over the long term, such a response can erode the ties between the university and society. This reduces the positive contribution that higher education can make to society and can even increase the risk of further attacks on the sector.

Social Cohesion

The sixth principle of protection is a commitment to ensuring that higher education fosters social cohesion. Given the sectarian and religious drivers of recent conflicts in the Middle East, another major response to protect higher education has been homogenization along sectarian lines. In the case of Lebanon, social conflict prompted many but not all universities to reorganize campuses according to the country's patchwork quilt of confessional divides. In the case of Iraq, during the intense sectarian conflict of 2005-2008, there was large-scale movement of academics from previously mixed universities to campuses that were nearly homogenous in terms of their ethno-sectarian profile. For example, Sunni staff left Basra University while Shiite staff left Mosul University. In Baghdad, meanwhile, Al-Nahrain became a bastion of the Sunni community while al-Mustansiriya University became a Shiite-dominated institution.

The price of this homogenization is that higher education served to further divide communities rather than foster reconciliation.[26] Across

the Middle East, while basic education is often formative—with schools attended by pupils drawn from the same ethnic, sectarian, geographic, or class based groups—higher education is by contrast *transformative*, with campuses offering a unique arena in which students meet "the other," often for the first time. Barriers between social classes, Muslim and Christian, urban and rural, settled and displaced, or Sunni and Shiite can be broken down. This point holds a cautionary tale for Syria, where it is imperative that universities do not come to resemble academic fortresses separated by ascribed identity rather than a truly national system capable of healing wounds and rebuilding social ties.

Regional Focus

In terms of international engagement with higher education crises in the Arab world, protection efforts have been limited and primarily focused on academic rescue. Scholar rescue programs such as the Institute of International Education (IIE) Scholar Rescue Fund, the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), and the Scholars at Risk Network have responded to higher education crises in the region with the noble goal of protecting and preserving the academic integrity of scholars, and in some cases, students. They do so in recognition of the fact that for the scholars displaced due to harassment, threats, or even attempts on their life, mere physical—or as some threatened scholars put it, 'biological'—protection in refugee camps on its own is insufficient. These programs also seek to engage such scholars as a valuable resource both during their displacement and for the future.

For the thousands of displaced scholars in the Middle East, the majority face the reality of unemployment and "de-skilling," thus eroding their potential to resume their careers upon return. Scholar rescue schemes address this by sustaining some of the region's most talented and threatened individuals and enabling them to develop new skills while in exile. Globally,

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[26] Sansom Milton, "The Neglected Pillar of Recovery: A Study of Higher Education in Post-war Iraq and Libya," (PhD thesis, University of York, 2013).

the majority of rescued scholars have been from the region, including 70.5 percent of those the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund assisted between 2002 and 2012.[27] Yet this only accounts for approximately 300 scholars in a region facing escalating conflicts and large-scale displacement crises.

While the work of scholar rescue programs is invaluable, they are limited in scope and tend to operate under a short-term crisis framework, rescuing small numbers of scholars for a limited time by finding them a temporary "academic" home. Meanwhile, the nature of conflict has changed. The region is witnessing more protracted conflicts, marked by sectarianism and internal power struggles. Efforts to rescue threatened scholars should therefore recognize this trend toward conflicts lasting far beyond the typical one- to two-year "rescue" stay. In 2013, for example, it was estimated that only 40 percent of Scholar Rescue Fund fellowship holders had returned to Iraq—and since then the academic displacement crisis has morphed due to the spread of IS.[28] The dilemma here is that if temporary rescue efforts turn into long-term relocations, then the agencies facilitating them are likely to come under criticism for perpetuating brain drain by prolonging the stay of displaced scholars, and even creating incentives for scholars to leave their home countries.

Although rescue efforts have increasingly focused on identifying regional homes of refuge, mostly in Jordan and Turkey, availability of resources remains an issue. It is now only possible to serve a small fraction of those in need within the existing resources and response mechanisms, which sadly continue to be "Western"-based and driven. It is high time that international organizations transfer the concept of, and responsibility for, scholar rescue to regional entities such as the Association of Arab Universities or the Arab League and the

Organization of Islamic Conference, while maintaining a partnership role in the provision of greater coordination and linking universities globally. This will enable greater collective action, and the pooling of resources. To live up to this potential, regional associations will have to realize that it is time that they pull together, go beyond current approaches, and demonstrate leadership to play a proactive role in protecting their own scholars and shaping the future of the region.

The seventh principle is therefore the need for a more regional approach to the protection of higher education. Such an approach is critical to better utilizing the existing resources offered by regional higher education systems as a response to displacement. For instance, a dire situation confronts hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians in refugee camps on the Syria-Jordan border, including many school- and university-age persons. Al-Bayt University in Jordan is situated several kilometers from a camp, yet has done little to engage with the refugee situation in terms of assessment, assistance, or educational access. The point of the example is not to blame the university but to illustrate the need to mobilize existing capacity in response to crises, pursuing initiatives that can be replicated across the region.

One example of a regional initiative is the proposal for establishing a "university in exile" in Turkey to educate refugee students and employ refugee scholars, a jointly funded Qatari-Turkish project to be undertaken in Gaziantep.[29] While the idea may appear attractive, such an institution will require vast resources and faces severe logistical challenges, not least creating viable faculties or research programs from scholars in widely varying disciplines. It also runs the risk of creating a stigma around being displaced by concentrating scholars and students in a new institution that lacks strong ties to the wider world of academia,

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[27] IIE Scholar Rescue Fund, "The Rescue of Science and Learning," (7 June 2015) <http://www.nxtbook.com/naylor/IIEB/C9184/IIESchol-arRescueFund/#/0>.
[28] IIE Scholar Rescue Fund, "IIE-SRF Iraq Project Briefing: Fall 2012/Winter 2013," 2013 <http://www.scholarrescuefund.org/media/IIE-SRF%20Iraq%20Briefing%20%28Fall%202012-Winter%202013%29.pdf>.
[29] "Turkey, Qatar to Establish University for Syrian Refugees: Minister," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 13 May 2015.

hindering the ability to integrate students and faculty into that world. A stronger example of an initiative drawing on regional capacity is the recent "From Camps to Campus" pilot project by the Institute of International Education—an innovative response that offers scholarships for young refugees to attend nearby universities, thereby preserving academic communities in the region.

Rebuilding Higher Education

Protecting higher education, complex and taxing on its own, is only part of the challenge faced by the region. The real long-term challenge is not to simply rebuild what existed before the conflict, but to ensure that the sector recovers in a way that leapfrogs years of isolation, decline, and destruction. Despite the costly consequences of conflict for higher education, the sector has often been neglected by strategies for rebuilding war-torn countries in the region. In the initial $18.4 billion fund allocated for the reconstruction of post-Saddam Iraq in 2003, for example, the higher education system received no funding at all.[30] This has been arguably detrimental for the overall recovery of the country.

Despite the many competing priorities for government spending in the region, government investment in this sector is central to an orderly and effective transition. The case for prioritizing higher and tertiary education in the aftermath of conflict can be built around four inter-related arguments:

The first is one of conflict and violence mitigation. Higher education offers a home—literal or intellectual—to the critical 18-25 year-old youth bracket, molding them in ways that will affect them for the rest of their lives. Harnessing the energy of young educated people should be a strategic priority. If neglected after being unsettled by conflict and politicized, young people are at risk of becoming marginalized and forgotten,

creating conditions ripe for their recruitment into violent groups and transforming areas into powder kegs. This dynamic is particularly vital in the Arab world today given the spread of conflict and the relatively high levels of enrollment in higher education compared to other war-torn regions, including 28 percent in Syria in 2012, 46 percent in the West Bank and Gaza in 2013, and over 60 percent in Libya in 2003.[31]

Clearly, early investment in the rebuilding of higher education can create safe and open environments that can function as islands of stability. Students are encouraged to put down weapons and pick up books and in the process change their mentality from one of violence and anger to one of learning and the future. From this perspective, higher education is relevant to all actors involved in reconstruction, including those concerned with disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR); social order; and psychosocial readjustment.

The second argument is one of economic necessity. Rebuilding higher education is important because countries in the region emerging from conflict face complex and inter-connected social, economic, physical, institutional, and psychological challenges. As reconstruction investments start to flow, jobs requiring some type of post-secondary education often emerge suddenly and in great numbers. Without qualified candidates for these jobs, affected countries risk failing to capture these employment opportunities, with high-return jobs siphoned off by neighboring nations or by expatriates from donor countries. This, in turn, misses an opportunity to train the next generation of societal leaders.

Thus, while a wide range of graduates can support recovery, there is a particularly strong rationale for strategic investment in areas directly supporting the transitions of war-torn societies. In the immediate term, training in teaching, nursing, aid work, and emergency

[30] John Agresto, *Mugged by Reality: The Liberation of Iraq and the Failure of Good Intentions* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007) 141.
[31] Data shows tertiary gross enrollment (ISCED 5 & 6) and was accessed online at: World Bank, "School enrollment, tertiary (% gross)," (7 June 2015) <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR/countries> .

medicine can help address educational, humanitarian and public health needs. In the longer term, investments should target the frontlines of reconstruction: public administration, economics, engineering, architecture, and urban planning.

The third argument is one of integration and social stability. To sustain peace while becoming economically competitive, post-conflict governments need to educate more young people in the critical areas identified above as well as in the fast-growing fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) that drive innovation and technological change. Carefully crafted higher education also opens opportunities for ethnic minorities and those with grievances who may have historically been less likely to enter these fields, female students in particular (who are under-represented in STEM disciplines in many countries in the region.) This of course requires a degree of subsidy and a reliance on state-run or public education as a starting point. Even if the state cannot pick up the tab for the entire sector, experience has shown that in the aftermath of conflict the private (or for-profit) sector is less likely to concern itself with such strategic choices.

The fourth and final argument is one of a collective regional revival. While many of the challenges faced by post-conflict higher education are present in stable and conflict-affected Arab countries alike, destruction within the region has acted like a scalpel, opening a wound to reveal many other deeper problems. It is not enough to simply rebuild higher education in the crisis zones of the Middle East by restoring the pre-conflict status quo with its attendant weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

The aftermath of crises and conflicts can bring about opportunities to build back better rather than to restore the ills of social and economic systems.

Over the long-term, investing in collective higher education capacities will be crucial to catalyze the transformation of the Arab world into a stable and prosperous region. This can firstly be achieved by pooling resources to foster quality higher education systems, providing the market-relevant skills and knowledge necessary to address the region-wide employability crisis.[32] Currently, 55 percent of the region's population is under 24 years old and 3-4 million new jobs must be created annually just to maintain existing unemployment levels.[33] While oil-rich countries are currently importing the vast majority of their labor from South and South east Asia, graduate unemployment rates are high across the region. For instance, rates in Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Egypt, and Algeria fall in the range of 15 to 25 percent.[34] This youth joblessness is at the root of economic exclusion and is a major driver of regional instability.

Although this situation is inherently linked to chronic weaknesses in the region's development—including political divisions, labor mobility, and a lack of vision—the fact remains that higher education systems throughout the region suffer from low research capacity, brain drain, overcrowded campuses, and highly theoretical instruction.[35] Scholars returning from time spent abroad can potentially help address this imbalance, benefiting from their exposure to other academic systems during their displacement. Though existing capacity should not be discarded outright, there is a clear opportunity for transformative change.

[32] International Finance Corporation, Islamic Development Bank, and Education for Employment, "Education For Employment: Realizing the Potential of Arab Youth," April 2011; Sara Hamdan, "Arab Spring Spawns Interest in Improving Quality of Higher Education," *The New York Times*, 6 November 2011; British Council, "Graduate Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Post-Arab Spring," 2012.

[33] Magdi Amin et al. eds., *After the Spring: Economic Transitions in the Arab World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); M. Chloe Mulderig, "An Uncertain Future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring," The Pardee Papers 16, Boston University, April 2013, <http://www.bu.edu/pardee/files/2013/04/Pardee-Paper-16.pdf?PDF=pardee-papers-16-arab-spring>.

[34] Yusuf Kocoglu and Alexandra Flayols, "Young Graduates in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries: Untapped Potential stuck in Job Queues" in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* 2012 (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2012); Daniel LaGraffe, "The Youth Bulge in Egypt: An Intersection of Demographics, Security, and the Arab Spring," *Journal of Strategic Security* 5 no. 2 (2012), 65-80.

[35] Vincent Romani, "The Politics of Higher Education in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects," Middle East Brief 36, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, May 2009.

Ultimately, while the goal of creating flourishing knowledge economies and societies in the region may seem idealistic, a reconstruction strategy that places higher education at the center of knowledge-led development could play a transformative role in leading the transition from conflict to prosperity. If given sufficient support, universities can equip the next generation with relevant skills and knowledge to enhance employability, spur entrepreneurship, and stem the exodus of the most talented. High quality universities can and should emerge as incubators for the production and commercialization of innovative research that could support entry into high-tech and high added-value sectors, drive diversification, and eventually end the era of oil dependence.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

As the Arab world slides further into open conflict, with escalating crises in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq, and elsewhere, it is more important than ever to draw attention to the central role played by higher education in the day-to-day development of the region, lest the sector slip further down the list of priorities. The sector represents precisely the type of long-term investment needed to address the deep-rooted drivers of instability in the region and embark on a sustainable process of recovery.

This policy briefing is merely a starting point to build up to a more systematic, region-wide picture of what the sector is experiencing as a result of conflict. More quantitative and qualitative research must be conducted in-country and preferably in real time by national scholars in order to build a comprehensive evidence base. Such evidence could then be used to advocate for and mobilize higher education institutions and communities around the world to draw attention to the plight faced by fellow students and academics and to encourage their governments to support protection and recovery efforts.

Advancing legal and political instruments for the protection of higher education inside conflict-affected countries should be the top priority of all stakeholders. It is surprising that so little attention has been paid to local protection, with the majority of international efforts working toward protecting displaced scholars and students. Building upon the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict* and the *Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack*, more work is necessary to establish principles of collective responsibility for protection that apply to a wider range of actors than the governments of conflict-affected societies. Furthermore, stakeholders must move beyond principles to establish evidence-based, sector-specific guidelines for protecting higher education, taking into account the social, cultural and educational dimensions of the sector.

The remarkable benefits of "rescuing" individual scholars, even for a year or two, on the scholars, their families, and the wider academic community (in both home and host countries) cannot be denied. However, across the region, the rescue effort has so far been spearheaded by a handful of international, Western-style NGOs. Due to their sources of funding, they have found it difficult to scale up and sustain their efforts, even as they struggle to match ever-mounting requests with host positions.

Their work could be enormously enhanced through a more explicit and structured alliance with a wide range of regional and even international host universities, invoking the core tenet of public service. This of course may require direct support from governments and will inevitably raise political issues related to displacement, employment, and migration. To support the large numbers of displaced academics and students throughout the region, universities able and willing to join such an alliance should develop their own "response units." The purpose of such units would be to facilitate the hosting, and potentially the temporary integration, of displaced scholars and students. This practical step would be significantly more

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[35] Vincent Romani, "The Politics of Higher Education in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects," Middle East Brief 36, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, May 2009.

achievable than the recent proposal for a university in exile.

For those efforts to be effective, international bodies with a mandate for protection of the displaced (such as the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and International Organization for Migration), must develop a better understanding of the needs and opportunities that exist around displaced scholars and university students. This will ensure that their displacement is not a period of degrading skills but rather one of maintaining and cultivating minds that can contribute to the support of their communities, both during their displacement and upon their return.

To do this effectively, donors, international agencies and national governments should come together to help formulate a robust regional architecture for protecting, rescuing and ultimately returning and reintegrating scholars. Given the spread of conflict in the region, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt—with the support of the Gulf states—must play a role in any regional platform. International bodies could also sponsor a region-wide dialogue on academic displacement that could resolve technical barriers to academic mobility, such as accreditation, recognition of certificates, and hiring practices.

When it comes to the rebuilding of higher education, early engagement is a must. Waiting until the guns fall silent could risk leaving an entire generation without the chance to access advanced educational opportunities. It is critical that some semblance of academic life is maintained to preserve these important spaces of dialogue and inquiry. They will prove critical in marshalling and directing plans and resources for rebuilding higher education and the country at large in the aftermath of war.

Higher education could get back on its feet much more quickly and play a constructive role in reconstruction if national governments and other stakeholders were to develop a collaborative strategic vision for the sector at an early stage of recovery. International actors could facilitate a broad consultation with all stakeholders, including higher education leaders, government officials, and civil society representatives. Such a process of dialogue could stimulate innovative thinking on the development of higher education, encourage a more collaborative governance of the sector, and support long-term planning and the clarification of the mission of universities.

Private higher education has often expanded rapidly following conflict in the region. While private universities are often accused of being low quality and poorly regulated, they can be more adaptable than centralized state-run universities, enabling a faster response to opportunities presented by recovery. To move past the unhelpful state/private dichotomy and ensure a sustainable funding base under resource constraints, innovative funding models that reduce dependency on the state should be experimented with, such as non-profit private universities and public-private partnerships. In contrast to the United States, with its long tradition of charitably-funded private universities, Middle Eastern private universities were established rapidly and largely by business persons with no modern traditions of philanthropy toward higher education. This is despite the fact that some of the region's oldest universities, such as al-Qarawiyyin in Tunisia, were funded generously by philanthropists, both male and female. Models of "twinning" with other universities in the region as well as employing *zakat* (or charitable contributions) should be explored.

Researching questions of conflict and recovery (from pure science, social science, and humanities perspectives) offers recovering universities unique opportunities to kick-start their research culture in cooperation with interested international partners. Yet the majority of research on issues surrounding displacement, emergency, crisis management, and post-war reconstruction is now led by northern universities, agencies, and NGOs and is highly extractive in nature. Their work would be much more effective if it were carried out in collaboration with local institutions and researchers. Only by generating world-class research capacity in the areas of humanitarian action and post-war recovery can Arab societies take genuine ownership of the rebuilding process.

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