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ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

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EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST
A CRITICAL SOMETHING IS MISSING

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Education in the Middle East (M.E.) has undergone a revolution in the last half century. From Morocco to Iran and from Sudan to Syria, the numbers of students and teachers, and, in some cases of schools, have exploded. Education budgets have risen in absolute and relative terms. There are more libraries and material in print for people to read and be better informed than ever before. College graduates continue to multiply even though large numbers cannot find productive jobs.

This should be a flattering picture of education in the region, but the reality belies the perception. For example, if the M.E. is so well educated, why are foreign experts in such high demand in the region? While exchange of experts is highly desirable, the M.E. countries, with the exception of Israel, tend to be importers of foreign expertise and hardly ever exporters, unless the experts leave as emigrants. This imbalance is particularly significant in science, technology, engineering, and construction. If M.E. education is so well advanced, why are the M.E. countries exporters mainly of primary goods and importers of manufactured and industrial goods? Why is labor productivity so low, relative to labor productivity in over half of the nations of the world, as measured by real per capita income?

The fact is that M.E. education is still lagging quantitatively and qualitatively. A close look at the educational profile of the region, except for Israel and possibly Lebanon, would uncover a rather pessimistic picture. While the level of achievement varies widely, certain features seem common. For example, adult literacy remains relatively low, especially among women. In nine M.E. countries more than 50% of all women over age 15 in 1993 were illiterate, and in six countries more than 50% of males and females combined were illiterate. Even the modest apparent levels of literacy are highly exaggerated because of the method of measurement. For instance, anyone who could sign a name might be counted as literate.

Budgets have increased but the needs of education have increased faster. Students are supposed to be attending schools, but enforcement is lax and absenteeism sometimes is considered a blessing to relieve over-crowdedness. Those who attend often have to be tutored in order to pass the national exams; the tutors frequently are their own teachers who try to enhance their incomes by tutoring. Schools are institutions of learning, but in many cases they have been made into political instruments. Strikes, demonstrations, and stone throwing often take the place of classes. The authorities encourage such behavior when the demonstrations are supportive and they penalize the students and the teachers if the protests are against government policies.

Child labor is still common. Discrimination against female

education is widespread and evident in both the level of literacy and the limited degree of specialization. Para-military training by splinter groups and militias often supplants regular schooling. The children are usually the losers.

To be literate is essential, but literacy and education are not the same thing. Education in most M.E. schools is still based on rote learning. The analytical power of the mind is rarely activated and students are not encouraged to be critical, analytical, or creative. These limitations which obstruct critical thinking are compounded by the imposed systems of censorship and control which tend to regulate what teachers teach, what students read, and what writers write and publish. Professors are under control of the politicians. Even the media is subject to spoken and unspoken limits on the freedom of expression and reporting. The students are in this way rendered passive consumers of distorted or manipulated knowledge, while their minds remain arrested in political, traditional, and religious cages. Their free thinking potential is circumscribed by the regimes in power—not only by the political regimes but also by the social, religious, and traditional forces as well.

The limitations on education are best demonstrated by the superficial elections practiced throughout the region, and the lack of elections altogether, again Israel is an exception. Pre-election approval of candidates, the virtual absence of secrecy in balloting, and full control by the ruling regimes render these elections an insult to free thinking and rational free choice. Students and teachers, intellectuals and the media experts are taught to accept this state of affairs, and most do.

Another reflection of the lagging quality and quantity of education is the limited flow of foreign investment capital in spite of the incentives made available by M.E. governments, as in Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt. It is not only the fear of instability, or the underdeveloped infrastructure that has discouraged foreign capital. It is also and primarily the relatively underdeveloped human capital that reduces the flow, both at the middle technical level as well as at the higher scientific and managerial levels.

It is hard to imagine the M.E. out of the dilemma of underdevelopment and backwardness without free, critical, and analytical education. Without radical change in their educational systems, they are condemned to continued economic and political backwardness, low productivity, low per capita earned real income, and chronic poverty. However, these conditions are not unchangeable. They can be altered for the better by policy and determination.

A very first step toward productive education is to advocate and promote a new enlightenment education based on a free, rational, and analytical system of learning. An equally important step is to separate education from religion and encourage secularism as a way of dealing with economic, political and social affairs, free of religious control or influence. This is not to ignore the importance of religion, but to revere it as a matter of personal and individual conscience. Religion should not be used to manipulate or control education, or inhibit intellectual growth. A third precondition for productive education is to develop a disciplined sense of time, respect for contract, and a habit of meeting deadlines. At present there is a great deal of waste of resources and loss of opportunity by putting little value on time, contract, and deadlines. One of the ironies of this situation is to hear someone explaining such behavior as "this is the M.E., or

this is Egyptó. Neither Egypt nor other countries of the M.E. are bound to accept time as free or the contract as breakable without a cost. The educational system is responsible for this state of mind among the literate and the illiterate.

These steps are some of the preconditions for coordinating education with economic development and modernization. However, these same conditions can be sustained only if the educational system itself undergoes serious reform. The relationship between education and the environment that makes it productive is a dynamic one. Each supports the other and if one fails the other fails, and both can stagnate together, which happens to be the tragedy of M.E. education at this time. Neither Arab socialism nor the market system, nor the theocratic and traditional systems of the region have managed to obliterate illiteracy or revolutionize education. Generations of students have become literate, but they have grown to be conformist, blindly obedient, and non-analytical. Their potential creativity has been suppressed, and their productivity and inventiveness have been dampened. In contrast, their compatriots who have managed to emigrate to countries with freer environments and more stimulating institutions have been great achievers and creators. Without radical changes in education in the near future more generations will be condemned to the same fate.

The M.E. countries have a long way to go before they can boast of a free, dynamic, and developmentally supportive education. They have the potential and the resources. Their leaders have the ability to break the stalemate and initiate a dynamic cycle of freeing and radicalizing education. The people and their leaders are a cross-roads. Let us hope that they will take the necessary steps, revolutionize their education, and liberate themselves. Only then will they be able to meet the challenges of development, modernization, high productivity, and competitiveness in the modern global economy and society.

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