



Social sciences in the Arab world

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The Arab world is home to a large number of talented students and academics, but the social embedding of science remains unsteady and research does not play a specific role. There are however significant differences between regions and countries: histories, social contexts, institutional arrangements, the role of the state, and past and present development models must all be taken into account.

The Arab world is home to a large number of talented students and academics. Paradoxically, no specific goal has been assigned for their research. As one of us observed:

the social understanding of science considers obtaining a PhD degree as the end of the reading and research process. The degree rather than the research record is what determines an individual's social status, both outside and inside the university.

(Al-Husban, 2008)

In other words, the social embedding of science remains unsteady and research does not play a specific role.

This general statement must be nuanced since there are significant differences between regions and countries: histories, social contexts, institutional arrangements, the role of the state and past and present development models must all be taken into account. By integrating these criteria, four different research and innovation models seem to emerge: the Gulf countries, the larger developmentalist states (Egypt, Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic), the Maghreb, and the Middle East.

Four regional models

The Gulf countries

Having obtained their independence in the 1960s and 1970s, most of the Gulf countries have adopted an 'Anglo-Saxon' approach to research, leading to the creation of 'elite' universities specializing in the natural and exact sciences, and to the development of partnerships with foreign countries and institutions. The human and social sciences, on the other hand, are relatively closed to collaboration with foreign partners and priority is given to Arabic-speaking academics. A pragmatic approach to science has come into being, which largely draws on local issues. In the social

sciences and humanities, an instrumental approach to research dominates: sociology effectively takes the shape of social engineering, economics is primarily business-oriented, and Islamic philosophy or law is dominant within the humanities. Research is mostly restricted to universities. It is sometimes funded by the state but more generally by foundations and is increasingly produced by an expanding number of foreign professors. In order to handle the 'post-oil' era, Gulf countries are allocating resources to manage the transition towards a knowledge economy. In order to do so, they import Western skills and expertise, through the creation of Gulf country campuses of internationally recognized universities (the Abu Dhabi chapter of the Sorbonne, for instance) (Romani, 2009).

The larger developmentalist states

From a very early stage, Egypt (as well as Iraq and to some degree the Syrian Arab Republic) established a mass education system – including universities – whose purpose was to train a technical workforce capable of implementing their development model of mass production geared to domestic markets. The so-called 'developmentalist state' (Amsden, 2001) played the main economic role. When it changed orientation, it also abandoned its monopoly over education. Private colleges and universities proliferated (doing little if any research) while the overall quality of public higher education diminished. It suffered from underfunding, leading to low staff incomes and status, and overcrowding. A number of academics and researchers have moved (at least temporarily) to the Gulf countries, where the increase in demand produces higher wages for foreign and Arabic-speaking academics. In Egypt, a substantial number of academics are drawn towards consultancy and expert positions. Support for research is mainly channelled through foreign – and more rarely local – funding agencies. Research no longer depends solely on state funding. These

new dynamics have significantly transformed academic hierarchies to the benefit of externally funded networks rather than state patronage.

The Maghreb countries

The Maghreb countries (Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) have adopted an institutional and intellectual model that draws its inspiration from Europe (especially from France) with which they have important scientific relations. Following independence, they set up universities and prestigious polytechnic institutes, highly selective schools for high-ranking bureaucrats and business leaders. They also established national research centres that focused on a variety of different fields, including the social sciences. State oversight remains strong, and nationalist and secular governments are managed by technocratic elites. The entire education and research system functions without private-sector support, which (even lately) has been unable to carve out a significant share of the research activity. Scientific talents and vocations are abundant, and research is recognized and accepted as a career.

The Middle East

In stark contrast to the larger developmentalist states and the Maghreb countries, the smaller Middle Eastern countries (Jordan, Lebanon) have centred their social and economic models around commerce and international trade rather than on industrial mass production. In these countries, most universities are private and quite recent. Private institutions do little research, except for the two oldest and most prestigious ones: the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Saint Joseph, established in Beirut in 1863 and 1875 respectively. The Lebanese University, set up in 1953, is the only public university in Lebanon. It mainly focuses on teaching (concentrating half of the country's student population) rather than research. Two or three others can be cited in Jordan: Jordan University in Amman and Yarmuk University at Irbid (which include human and social sciences, while the very good JUST University at Irbid is only for S&T disciplines).

A number of commercial research centres, consultancy firms and NGOs have recently been created in the social sciences in response to demand for internationally funded field studies from foundations and universities.

The social grounding of the social sciences

As in other scientific disciplines, social sciences training and research in the Arab world are mostly performed by academics who work in public institutions. They generally equal or outperform other university sciences numerically.

Students in the human and social sciences account for two-thirds to three-quarters of total enrolment figures, and faculty members for a third to a half of total staff (Table 2.4). The main difference between the social sciences and other disciplines is not so much the working conditions (professional status, wages, careers, funding) but the ways in which they affect and are received by society. The social sciences are intimately related to local problems and realities. Research results are often published in local languages for a local audience. They reflect local values and understandings. They are not only influenced by these values, but can also have an influence on them. The social sciences are sensitive to the social environment and to its support to them.

Social and political environment

Arab societies are generally governed by social communities, lineage relations and religious beliefs, which all tend to impinge on creativity. A highly critical report from the United Nations Development Programme, written by recognized regional experts, has highlighted inadequate relationships to knowledge as one of the three main handicaps hindering progress in the Arab states (UNDP and Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2002). The report criticized a trend at both the teaching and family education levels to hinder freedom of thought, leaving little room for creativity. In societies that are dominated by power, wealth and patriarchal values, knowledge has a relatively low social status. Furthermore, the state and the political sphere dominate all other activities. There is a trend within authoritarian regimes to exercise a heavy control over the social sciences, limiting freedom of thought and setting boundaries in terms of acceptable and unacceptable areas for research and teaching (Al-Taher, 2004).

TABLE 2.4 > Proportion of human and social sciences students and faculty members in the total number of students and faculty in selected Arab countries, circa 2004

	Morocco	Algeria	Tunisia	Jordan	Kuwait
Percentage students	78	49	62	61	65
Percentage faculty members	41	27	32	50	48

Source: ESTIME background reports (all countries except Kuwait) and UNESCO special initiative of the Global Forum on Higher Education and Research (Kuwait). Data refer to Morocco 2003/04; Algeria 2000/01; Tunisia 2004/05; Jordan 2003/04; Kuwait 2004.

Support for science through policy

Nevertheless, when we look at the overall figures, science is actually developing in the region (Arvanitis, 2007; Satti, 2005). Despite its reservations and doubts, the state has done a great deal for research through regulatory measures,

notably by linking academic careers to research activities. As a symbol of modernity (the Gulf), rationality (Tunisia), national unity (the Syrian Arab Republic), or the development model (Nasser in Egypt, but also Algeria), higher education, and to a certain degree research, has at one time or another benefited from the support of national governments. Despite a few exceptions in some specific periods in Egypt or Algeria, governments have not totally restricted academic freedom as happened in other parts of the world. Instead they have tied academia down to centrally controlled institutions (public services, research centres, polytechnics and even universities), preventing the emergence of autonomous scientific communities. In certain instances, modernist factions in power have developed strong alliances with the promoters of scientific activity in order to advance their own struggles in the political sphere. Algeria offers the clearest example of such a 'socio-cognitive bloc' (El Kenz, 1997), periodically uniting the research avant-garde with 'technocrats' in order to defeat the 'patrimonialists' (as the two opposed views of Algeria were labelled). This is a volatile and fragile form of support since it is conditioned by the regime, the factions in power, political alliances and personalities. In certain cases, policy changes reflect strong ideological oppositions over the role that scientific or religious knowledge should play in society (El Kenz, 1997; Waast, 2006).

Other non-state sources of support for science

Fortunately there are other sources of support for scientists who wish to devote more time to scholarly activities. International scientific collaborations help researchers to keep up to date and to gain access to funding. Over the past few years, the European Union has greatly influenced the research agenda in the region. Other countries such as Egypt or Jordan have privileged the development of ties with the USA (Pasimeni et al., 2006; Rodríguez Clemente and González Aranda, 2007).

Throughout these countries, a diversity of 'sociocognitive blocs' contribute to link scientific activities to specific communities or social groups, such as liberal elites in Egypt and Lebanon, influential families in the Gulf states, or the technocratic strata in Algeria. Despite its idiosyncratic nature, this feature is paramount in explaining the appearance and survival of research groups and agendas. This has also been the case in peripheral countries on other continents (Vessuri, 2006). The very content of research in social sciences reflects these alliances by promoting a role for social sciences that can be qualified as a support to development rather than a critical stance toward society.

Finally, the growth of science appears to stem from the professional norms that are internalized by a few individuals during their training, and by specific institutions (at least one or two per country) that compete for international recognition and which use research to demonstrate their value and status.

The multiple roles of scientists

The adverse features that have just been mentioned help us to understand the scientific community's tendency to hold a variety of different professional positions, which are not always linked to research. This is due not necessarily to financial pressure, but rather to the desire for status. It is also a response to social and family pressures. Close relatives and the people in an individual's direct social environment do not generally regard the job of 'researcher' as a proper professional activity. It does not have the same recognition as 'professor', 'doctor' or 'engineer,' for instance (Al-Husban, 2008).

Social scientists' participation in the public sphere has risen. It now involves writing in reputable news magazines and newspaper opinion columns, working for think-tanks, organizing symposiums, taking part in empowerment initiatives, holding other more 'reputable' professional jobs (lawyers, entrepreneurs, political party representatives or government officials), and getting involved in policy design and political activism. All these activities are time-consuming, and have consequences for the type of research that is being undertaken in terms of methodologies (often hyper-empirical and instrumental), topic choices (linked to development issues), and the targeted audiences (wider public rather than academia). As a result, researchers who work in this way can look more like consultants or political activists than scholars. Their reputation is more grounded on a personal basis than in their role in collective research activities, their contributions to a school of thought or their actions to advance academic institutions.

Increasing demands for the social sciences

Demands for the social sciences arise from a variety of sources: from local businesses, from specific groups seeking legitimization (factions or lineages looking for historiographers), from the general public (interested in law, for instance), from the state (social engineering) and from the media (news corporations and television channels interested in culture and current affairs).

There are also steadily more international demands for social science. They include foreign scholars seeking local

correspondents and partners (for example, in the political sciences or in archaeology), and more recently, international organizations (the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], the United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia [ESCWA] and so on) seeking empirical studies and fieldwork on hot social topics. Foreign foundations (for example, the Ford Foundation, German foundations and large NGOs) have supported scholars in the region in their efforts to stimulate intellectual life there.

Various consequences of these changing priorities have been observed. The first is a change in the hierarchy of disciplines: those in poor demand (which curiously include economics) are pushed aside, whereas others that have a strong empirical and local orientation are promoted. These include anthropology, law and political science (Al-Husban, 2008; Kabbanji and Moussaoui, 2007). The second consequence is the emergence of new priorities in topic choice. Researchers subcontracted by foreign sponsors tend to uncritically adopt the 'global agenda' for their own business reasons. Others focus on conventional topics so as not to shock the local public. The third and most visible consequence relates to institutions. Growing international demand for the social sciences has led to a proliferation of private research centres in the Middle East. These are devoted to empirical studies and take part in empowerment activities. Such centres are generally set up and managed by young 'science entrepreneurs'. These are often talented scholars who keep one foot in the university system while simultaneously acting as a globalized elite mediating between local audiences and foreign sponsors (Hanafi and Tabar, 2005). These centres hire would-be academics on a contractual basis, introducing yet more diversity into their working conditions, and creating a proletariat of temporary investigators, transforming the structure of the research profession.

National or global social sciences?

In most countries, there are universities that adopt high standards for their academics and function as sanctuaries for research. In others, a few scholars stick to research, which they pursue in order to seek promotion and also by inclination. An inquiry into the research topics most favoured in the region shows that the chosen themes are influenced by national concerns. Literature, history and law are most active and valued, ahead of socio-anthropology and the political sciences. The research topics of local social scientists do not necessarily match those of foreign specialists working on these same countries (Rossi and Waast, 2003). Much engaging research goes unnoticed

abroad, mainly because it is published in Arabic and rarely translated; and also because it is not necessarily connected to the global agenda. The bulk of the research output is centred on local issues (maybe too much), using hyper-empirical approaches rather than comparative analysis. Certain, generally young, scholars express a greater interest in international perspectives, notably when they join private research institutes to escape local mandarins and clichés. Yet even their research output goes generally unpublished, mainly because international funding bodies are more interested in 'edible' reports and practical research, rather than theoretical research.

The Arab world mostly has a common language and there is significant circulation of talent, which is principally drawn to the Gulf, with very limited movement between the Maghreb and the Mashreq. But intellectual cross-fertilization is confined to the subregions. Publishers and translators, as well as university syllabuses, are generally specific to their country of production (Mermier, 2005; Sghir Janjar, 2005). With some notable exceptions, the work of authors from other parts of the Arab world is neither well known nor sought after. Interest exists primarily in publications from Europe or North America. The academic scene is predominantly national in scope. When it does go beyond national borders, it tends to be globally rather than regionally oriented.

What role for research?

There is a wide variety of research-oriented bodies in the Arab world: real capacities, dedicated establishments, publishers, audiences, interested media, international funding bodies and governmental bodies. While social research is growing, it seems to lack a specific and socially acceptable role. In other disciplines (engineering, biomedical research and various natural sciences), research benefits from a relatively high degree of support, particularly in countries that are moving towards a knowledge economy in which innovation takes precedence over the exploitation of natural resources. But the usefulness of the social sciences is usually under debate. They tend to be regarded as a cultural activity, perhaps like a museum, or an ornament for their local sponsors. Alternatively they can be seen as a pragmatic social engineering activity with commercial opportunities, sponsored by foreign funding agencies. Rarely are they seen as a critical body of knowledge cultivated for its own sake.

This means that there is a growing imbalance between different types of research (public and private) depending on the approach taken to it, which may be reflexive or

instrumental. There has recently been an infatuation for products targeting non-academic audiences, either local or foreign. Instrumental studies, empirical field research and action research that seek to directly influence society are all promulgated. Academic essays, theorization, methodological progress and reflexive analysis appear to have progressively lost ground. Tensions between different types of activity are of course positive. However, in the Arab countries, these tensions are not regulated within scientific communities but rather externally via the state or the market.

What are the prospects? Predictions are always risky since much depends on the attitudes of the state and of scientific communities. In an uncertain political context, it is interesting to note that several governments have expressed a sudden interest in the social sciences, recruiting a number of young academics and launching evaluations. This proves their increased awareness and justifies substantial funding efforts. Morocco and Algeria are good examples of this; Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt are less determined. The Gulf countries, which some observers

consider to be the source of a future 'Arab Renaissance', are paying increasing attention to the arts and humanities and to the social sciences as a component of the future knowledge society.

In order for these new forms of support to produce positive results, scientists must agree on more formal and collective forms of organization. These might include labelled and assessed research units or laboratories such as the ones established or planned in the Maghreb, common research projects – far-reaching and linked to additional funding, as in some private bodies – and a keen sense of professionalism and responsibility.

If the social sciences are to be recognized as sound sources of constructive critiques and suggestions, they will have to become less atomized and less dependent on external factors. They will need to reinforce and consolidate their own self-regulated scientific communities, watching over the ethos of the profession, restoring interest in theory and rigorous methodology, and above all organizing and adding flavour to a vivid public scientific debate. 😊

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