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Arab Education: Reality and Prospects

Publications of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
-ISESCO- 1440H / 2019A.D.



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Foreword

The major factors undermining the Islamic entity include low return on education at all levels, its diminishing impact on holistic development, and regression in the role education used to play in eras of civilizational distinction. In these eras, knowledge used to be the pillar of intellectual and cultural life in Islamic societies while education was a widely free-for-all right. Moreover, the furtherance of knowledge as well as the development, promotion and dissemination of education were among the duties that society used to carry out spontaneously, driven by faith and motivated by *taqwa* which would urge people to spend money and effort and make contributions to get closer to Almighty Allah.

Looking into the issue of education and studying its various aspects have come to be among the highest necessities which require meeting strict and pressing commitments that cannot be evaded, the aim being to move from a stage of weakness and impotence to one of strength and efficiency.

Notwithstanding the abundance of studies and research published in the Islamic world on education, adopting various methods and perspectives and producing both positive and negative results, the issue of education with all its underlying aspects, problems and questions is still on top of present-day social, cultural and even political issues in the Arab Islamic countries as a whole. Such issues require searching for the most effective means and the most appropriate ways of achieving societal growth and progress.

The study I am publishing today, together with the English and French versions all in one book, tackles the issue in some detail, true to my conviction which I was able to verify through my experience, extensive research and in-depth studies in this area; namely that education is a decisive issue if not the prime source of all issues. On addressing this issue and finding scientific solutions to it hinges the real rather than fictitious improvement of the current situation of the Ummah. Such an improvement will have far-reaching impacts and will benefit Arab Islamic societies as a whole.

I participated with this study at the First Conference of Arab Thought Foundation, convened in Cairo on 27-29 October 2002. The Conference was held under the patronage of His Excellency Mr Muhammad Husni Mubarak, President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, and was attended by a distinguished panel of Arab thinkers and intellectuals coming from different Arab countries and certain Western states.

It is my conviction that the study of the issue of education in the Arab Islamic world will always remain an open issue on which views will differ, with new forms and aspects emerging and developing as time goes by. Suffice it, however, that I examined the subject in depth, and endeavoured to draw conclusions which will no doubt be beneficial, practical and workable whenever strong will and good planning are available.

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Introduction:

The high significance inherent to the issue of Arab education in its current situation and near future stems from three considerations that I summarize as follows:

- **The first** consideration is that education is a central issue which tops the list of general concerns both at the level of governments and peoples in view of the organic correlation that exists between education and development and its great impact on societal life, whether negatively or positively.
- **Secondly**, tackling the problems of education, which are numerous and complex while some of them have been passed on for several decades, is the key to redressing the current general situation, changing course, and rationalizing the general action of both governments and peoples. The rationale is that there is no improvement, no progress and no real development unless education is reformed, promoted and developed in a comprehensive manner.
- **The third** consideration is that laying the foundations of the future must be grounded on the prime basis of education; otherwise, we will have chosen the wrong path for meeting the challenge of the future. The failure to meet this challenge is bound to compound the current civilization crisis of which the only way out will be to bring about a deep, comprehensive and integral development of the education system as a whole in such a way as to touch upon all levels and components.

For that reason, the decision to place this subject on the agenda of the First Conference of the Arab Thought Foundation was judicious in every respect. Certainly, education constitutes the cornerstone of

the process of thought expansion, societal revival by elevating man on both intellectual and spiritual fronts, and the configuration of the future of the Arab Islamic Umma. Accordingly, there is no future for this Umma should education in the Arab and Islamic world fail to grow, develop and prosper in such a manner as to keep abreast of present-day developments in all fields.

Education is thus a decisive issue if not the prime source of all issues, to be specific. On treating this issue and finding scientific solutions to it hinges upon the real rather than the fictitious improvement of the situation of the Umma. Such an improvement will have far-reaching impacts and will benefit Arab Islamic societies as whole.

I will within this frame tackle the subject of this session according to three axes which I consider to be more deserving of examination, study and exchange of views. To avoid overrunning the time allotted, I will try to be as concise as possible by focusing on the main points and by raising the most important issues without going into the details which are beyond the scope of this study.

First: the Problem of Methodology:

This subject poses a problem of methodology and procedure, shall I say, which consists in the structure of the title. This question should give pause for thought which I will try to keep as short as possible before moving on.

Is the expression, “Arab Education,” correct and appropriate methodologically and scientifically? Does education, as a process of edification of human mind and behaviour, have a nationality so that an education cannot be regarded as such but in relation to it? Or is

education a neutral process given that it is a mind constructor and that construction entails science, rules and an approach which rests on effective planning and efficient execution, and originates from a global view which anticipates the future and stems from reality?

Do we hear or read in Europe, for instance, about “German education” or “French education”? Or is education there, as it is in all parts of the world, simply an education that has rules, approaches, peculiarities, vision and philosophy?

Education is a neutral science just like sciences in all other fields. It is therefore not correct from a methodological and scientific perspective to say this is an Arab education and that is a non-Arab one because education, as we have previously seen, is about human construction, and because construction which has its own rules and principles rests on effective planning and efficient execution, as we have already mentioned.

This argument is not aimed at bereaving education of its civilizational substance so that it becomes an education with no identity; quite the opposite. In fact, we can -or rather we must- confer on education an aspect that we also share so as to obtain an education that has an Arab Islamic identity and that originates from a civilizational vision; an education which belongs to us and reflects our particularities.

But this is one thing and what I meant is something else given that education as a construction process, a science and an approach represents the melting pot where we can effectively pour a vision which stems from our faith, identity and needs, the requirements of our real life, and the challenges inherent in our surrounding conditions.

Accordingly, we have a tendency to use the expression which is closer to reality by substituting “education in the Arab States” for “Arab education.” Our purpose is not to play with words, but to ascertain a correct methodology is adopted, define concepts, and keep the expression used in its appropriate context so as to ensure objectivity and guard ourselves against using words outside the context of their real meanings so as not to go astray and get confused.

Second: Where did it all start?

The time allotted to this presentation does not allow dwelling on the original roots of the problems of education in Arab Islamic societies in general. But we can cut it short by saying that the original methodological flaw started with the artificial and abnormal duality within education systems, commonly found today in all Arab Islamic countries.

The modern education system emerged in the Arab and Islamic world, by the end of the nineteenth century, and was confined to three countries: the Ottoman State, India and Egypt; before the cycle expanded in the early twentieth century to include all Arab Islamic countries by the middle of the last century. Consequently, the system took on a permanent and continuous aspect, and became an established and uncontested matter.

This system divided education into three categories:

- **Literary education.**
- **Scientific education.**
- **Religious education.**

This division gave rise to a dangerous imbalance within educational thought, a rift in mind, perception and vision, and a split in the overall personality of individuals and society. Thus, it became firmly established in the collective mind and among the general public that the source of such duality was to be found in the education system itself, which the modern State has to adopt and act according to its requirements.

This duality is opposed -diametrically- to the nature of the Arab Islamic mind, to the essence of Arab Islamic civilisation, and even to scientific logic itself and the nature of things. Indeed, it is one of the educational dilemmas and problems which undermine capabilities, squander efforts, and hinder the natural growth of the educational process as a whole.

The danger that this duality represents lies in the fact that it instills in the general mind the impossibility of bringing together the three tiers of education as part of a single context where the conditions of complementarity, balance, concord and harmony are met. It is this pattern that characterised Islamic civilisation throughout the ages.

This education system is deep-rooted and widely spread in the Arab Islamic world, which causes this flaw to be a permanent feature in the education process in general, an imbalance which we consider to be one of the main causes behind low return on education. This results in a state of instability of which the most dominant characteristics is a certain split in personality. Such a split gives rise to a terrible duality and a dangerous division, thus weakening the intellectual and civilizational building of the Umma.

This duality should not lead to specialization or be taken as its objective equivalent since specialization is a necessary and unquestionable

matter which does not require - evidently - tearing the personality of individuals apart, splitting their minds and scattering their thoughts over three levels: literary, scientific and religious. Specialization can be pursued within a framework of complementarity and as part of a comprehensive system in any branch of knowledge without the emergence of a dual personality and divergent tendencies within a single entity.

Third: The Relapse:

The Arab Islamic society had been until the end of the nineteenth century bent on serving education. On the adoption of the modern system, it is education that began to serve society. This appears at first sight both natural and consistent with the role of education and its mission in society. After some contemplation and close examination, however, we come to discover a discrepancy which turns the whole matter upside down.

Society used to be responsible for education at all levels while the role of public authorities, irrespective of the prevalent systems of government, was limited to providing support, encouragement and theoretical supervision in one way or another, within the framework of a set of rules that govern established relations in society. Accordingly, education used to grow and expand spontaneously as a result of local community initiatives without the governing authorities bearing the burden of such growth and the costs of this expansion.

When the modern and contemporary system of education became a widespread phenomenon, following the establishment of the modern State in the Arab Islamic world, education matters became the exclusive duty of governments. That consisted originally in the

creation of an official apparatus in the government first known as “*Nizarat al-Ma‘arif*,” as it was the case in Egypt in the last third of the nineteenth century. This governmental apparatus was after known as “*Wizarat al-Ma‘arif*,” “*Wizarat al-Ta‘lim*,” “*Wizarat al-Tarbiya al-Wataniya*,” “*Wizarat al-Tarbiya wa Ta‘lim*” or “*Wizarat al-Tahzeeb al-Watani*.” Subsequently, ministries of “Higher Education” and “Scientific Research” were set up whereas others combined both “Higher Education and Scientific Research.” Thus, education at all stages and levels fell within the ambit of governments, though certain types of education preserved their financial independence.

This system constituted a burden to governments and imposed obligations that they were not always able to fulfil to perfection. Such a situation led, still leads and will always lead to the deterioration of education as a result of worsening budgetary deficits due to the shortage of resources or the depletion of sources of wealth for certain countries.

We notice here that the early stages of the emergence of modern universities in Arab countries in particular and Islamic countries in general were characterised by local community initiatives. Thus, the Egyptian University for instance -Cairo University today- was established in 1908 thanks to local community efforts with no intervention on the part of the government. This situation was totally natural and consistent with what is customary in Arab Islamic societies. Such was the case in India and Turkey at the time of the Ottoman State.

It is this system, where university education is based on community initiatives, which prevails today in Europe and the United States of America. In fact, there is consensus among researchers interested in

the history of education as part of comparative civilization studies that this system currently in force in the West was borrowed from Arab Islamic civilisation.

That was the relapse which instead of harnessing society for education in a general sense, including institutions, associations, clubs, local community unions and endowments, turned public education at all levels into a heavy burden to governments. In most cases, these governments fail to meet the costly obligations required to continue spending on education at all levels in a full and regular manner.

Though the expansion of private education not falling under the State has become a common social phenomenon in several Arab Islamic countries, public education is still the most widespread and prevalent of all.

The role of the State in the area of education with respect to spending and supervision are bound to remain as long as the current roles and jurisdiction of the State commonly in force in the world continue to be observed. However, reducing the burden borne by the State with regard to education expenditure is one of the necessities of modernization, development, and adaptation to present-day changes. The reason is that this is the system which is adopted in most countries of the world and which has proven its worth and use.

I am of the opinion that the general economic conditions will force the State in Arab Islamic countries to limit expenditure to elementary or secondary education, and will lead to a gradually diminishing role of the State in catering for tertiary education.

The expansion of education in our countries, which is the major condition for taking the great leap forward necessary for civilizational

revival, hinges on a large contribution of communities to sharing the costs of education, whose burden keeps rising year after year. In that way, the State will be able to better carry out its supervision and patronage roles, and to control the general trends of the education process in accordance with the supreme interests of the country and in such a way as to achieve national objectives and pave the way for joining the world process.

The State of Education in Arab Countries:

If thought guides the march of society, education is the primary prerequisite for the growth and expansion of thought. Accordingly, the more education expands and progresses in all areas the more thought reaches higher standards, recovers its normal condition, and plays its role in such a way as to have a considerable impact on civilizational edification, economic development and social progress.

The state of education in the Arab world does not depart from this rule. The main distinguishing features of this state can be summarized as follows:

- a) The adoption of different educational policies and the multiplicity of systems and methods in the Arab countries, which almost totally isolates these countries from each other. Such a state of affairs weakens cultural and intellectual ties among these countries and reduces the opportunities of exchanging expertise and capabilities with a view to expanding and improving education within the frame of shared intellectual and civilizational backgrounds.
- b) The failure of a number of educational curricula to keep up with contemporary developments and techniques, as well as to keep abreast of and closely monitor current international

mutations in the educational field. The result is the worsening of the divide between education in the Arab world and its counterpart in the contemporary world.

- c) The large number of less qualified instructors. It should be noted that it is those who earn their high school diplomas with low grades who are oriented towards faculties of education and teacher training colleges. They are also the product of the prevailing education system based on memorization rather than an education directed towards critical thinking and creativity. They, therefore, apply the same system upon their graduation, once serving within various educational institutions.
- d) The absence of an adequate school environment in a number of Arab countries, whether in terms of buildings, classroom and laboratory equipment, or opportunities of free opinion expression, besides highly centralized administration. All these factors have a negative effect on the education process and restrict freedom of initiative, action and thinking in addressing the problems facing educational administrations and the teaching profession whether in schools, institutes and faculties.
- e) Rampant illiteracy in a number of Arab countries and the inability of these countries to fight it in an effective and comprehensive manner in spite of the efforts made and money spent in this regard.

I have selected a sample of figures available at ISESCO on the state of education in Arab countries. The figures constitute a model which can be generalized on all Arab Islamic countries. Here is a summary of these figures:

Syria:

- Percentage of expenditure: 23.54% (preschool education), 22.91% (primary education), and 14.67% (secondary education).
- Number of pupils and students: 4,144,525 (according to 2000-2001 figures).

Morocco:

- Percentage of expenditure: 18.25% (preschool education), 28.76% (primary education), and 19.97% (secondary education). Total percentage: 5.19%.
- Number of pupils and students: 5,369,063 (according to 2000-2001 figures).
- Number of graduates: 26,303 (according to 1998-1999 figures).

Saudi Arabia :

- Percentage of expenditure: 10.48% (preschool education), 11.99% (primary education), and 12.73% (secondary education). Total percentage: 9.27%.

Egypt:

- Percentage of expenditure: 24% (preschool education), 22.98% (primary education), and 16.95% (secondary education). Total percentage: 4.05%.

Despite the gloomy picture these figures draw of the condition of education in the Arab world, we cannot go so far as to claim that educational policies in Arab countries have been a complete failure. That would disclaim the tremendous efforts that were and

are still being made on several fronts. We should, however, caution that continuing to act in accordance with the educational policies currently in force is likely to lead to results which do not favour development of society, which does not allow the latter to catch up with scientifically and industrially developed countries.

The World Bank Report:

According to a World Bank report on education in developing countries in 2002, one out of five children in developing countries does not go to school; that is, almost 113 million children in the world. It is needless to say that Arab countries are ranked among developing countries in international reports while others are considered among countries living below the poverty line.

The report adds that the whole world agrees that education constitutes the primary and most important element in development and poverty eradication, and that the widening gap between the level of education in poor and rich countries explains the reasons behind the access of 4.8 million people in developing countries to only 20% of the world gross domestic product.

The report adds that around 40% of children who do not go to school live in Sub-Saharan African countries, 40% in Southern Asia, and more than 15% in the Middle East and North Africa. Arab States fall within these regions.

Presented by World Bank President James Wolfensohn at the International Conference on Education held in Stuttgart, Germany in October 2002, the report lays stress on the need for rich countries to bridge the education gap with poor countries, including those in the Arab world.

The Challenges Facing the Arab World in the Third Millennium:

The Arab world is at the centre of a raging world struggle, which makes it targeted from all sides and exposed to dangers from all contending parties on the international scene. As a result, the challenges facing Arab countries assume greater proportions in a manner that deeply affects public life and reflects badly on the educational process as a whole.

The major challenges can be summarized as follows:

- a)** Cultural challenges, at the level of theory development, planning, and cultural action in all its fields, as well as interaction on an equal footing with the strong cultural currents coming from both West and East.
- b)** Economic challenges, at the level of options, reform, applications, and adjustment to modern economic systems, and making a success of the process of comprehensive economic reform.
- c)** Social challenges, at the level of fighting the dangerous triad that is poverty, ignorance and disease, resisting despair which threatens to drive youth to collapse, and reconciling modern patterns and systems of behaviour, on the one hand, and the preserving of cultural and civilizational fundamentals and particularities on which the social system is based, on the other.
- d)** Political challenges, at the level of government and administration systems and the extent to which these can meet the expectations of Arab peoples and comply with the unchanging values of the Arab Islamic civilization in this area. The

challenges also involve political practices and the nature of relationship between citizens and the government authorities.

- e) Development challenges, at the level of efforts made to remove obstacles to development, and the laying of foundations for developmental recovery in all fields.

A solid, adequate and purpose-driven education constitutes the major starting point for confronting all these challenges. However, here as well, Arab countries are suffering from immense challenges that must be confronted and conquered. The main challenges are as follows:

- a) Rapid progress in the fields of communication, information and digital technology, and the lack of the material, technical and academic means in Arab countries to catch up with and adapt to this progress.
- b) Globalization and its impact on the shaping of identity and the building of personality, as well as failure to fully realize the real dangers inherent to the system of sweeping globalization.
- c) Adaptation of the education output to the growing needs of the job market.
- d) Freedom of education, which is limited to the role vested in the State without affording the private sector and local community institutions, organizations and associations the opportunity to exercise the right to free thinking with a view to education expansion. This state of affairs paralyzes potential, stifles ambition, and sows the seeds of despair over the usefulness of reform, which is completely at variance with the spirit of Arab Islamic civilization and heritage in this respect. Indeed,

free intellectual sessions used to be held in mosques, where various Islamic ideas and views were discussed and solutions to problems and dilemmas facing society devised.

This does not mean, however, that there is no way these challenges can be surmounted and transformed from negative to positive challenges that would foster work, stimulate motivation, and strengthen resolve. To achieve this level of thinking, management and practice, the scientific approach to planning and implementation must be adopted.

Planning for a Better Education:

It is possible to think up a conception of what we can do in the area of education development in light of our understanding of reality and our anticipation of the future. The reason is that this is the most accurate option which stands a good chance of success in all fields pursuant to the scientific rule followed in planning future programmes, plans and strategies. According to this rule, good planning based on accurate premises and correct conceptions and projections must stem from a deep, clear and subtle understanding of reality in every respect. It must also be preceded by admitting the inaccuracy of the established system and the necessity to introduce changes and respond to the need for innovation and modernization. The objective is to achieve what is better, more beneficial and more responsive to the requirements of both the present and the future. We therefore suggest taking a number of steps. These include:

- a) Developing education policies and ensuring their homogeneity in line with present-time challenges and developments in such a way as to reasonably live up to the growing needs of Arab countries in this area.

- b)** Formulating homogeneous educational curricula premised on the fundamentals of Arab culture and using contemporary methodological and technological approaches in a way that combines preserving the particularities of identity and adapting to present-day mutations.
- c)** Equipping teachers with a balanced training which combines vocation for this respectable profession, quality education and teaching, and what would ensure the usefulness and efficiency of the mission and role of teachers considering that they constitute an effective and active element which enjoys an estimable status in society.
- d)** Providing an appropriate school environment, with regard to both form and content, where pupils would find an enabling climate for learning and the acquisition of knowledge necessary for mental and emotional development. The ultimate goal is to prepare Arab citizens to be in a position to serve their great nation and lay the foundation for revitalizing their Umma.
- e)** Honouring teachers, helping them hold a position worthy of their social status, offering them enough incentives to develop their knowledge and skills, and blotting out the negative effects of the stereotyped image that society has of teachers, particularly that acquired through the media and dramatic works.
- f)** Encouraging and catering for talented learners, facilitating their orientation towards fields of study that match their interests and capabilities, offering them all opportunities of reaching high financial and professional standards, and stimulating competition among them.
- g)** Supporting educational and scientific research within institutions of higher education, using the findings of outstanding

research and studies to develop and upgrade education at various levels and stages of education, and extending financial and moral encouragement to researchers engaged in this area.

The Education of the Future:

It has been firmly established that adequate and useful education which positively reflects on reality and contributes to the development and progress of society is an education which continually looks forward.

The education which alters reality, brings about revival, and develops society is definitely that which shapes the future since building the future cannot be separated from building the present, as we all know. Accordingly, an education which does not reach present-day standards and does not adjust to and keep up with changes is an education that is doomed to failure, and is thus not worthy of becoming the education of tomorrow.

Certainly, reaching such a high level of education expansion requires a strong and resolute political will in order to introduce the necessary drastic changes in the education process in a broad and comprehensive manner. Education will not develop in the Arab and Islamic world through reform dictated by circumstances, immediate remedies or stopgap measures which aim to gain the general public's trust and avoid trouble for governments by providing for peoples' demands which do not always reflect the real nature of needs felt in the area of education.

This development requires linking the education process to scientific and technological development, on the one hand, and to contemporary changes at the level of education systems and methods, on the other. It also requires defining education objectives in accordance with the requirements of civilizational edification,

and directing such objectives towards triggering growth within Arab Islamic societies on all fronts.

We have now at our disposal a pool of theories and plans that we have devised during the last decades to develop education in the Arab and Islamic world, on top of which are the two strategies set out by the Islamic Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) as well as the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO). Other strategies include the scientific, technological and innovation strategy and the cultural strategy for the Islamic world formulated by the Islamic Organisation.

These four strategies set out to shape the educational, cultural and scientific future in light of the rapid changes witnessed in all fields. The process of implementation of these plans and strategies has not achieved the levels sought in the member countries of the two Islamic and Arab organisations. If this situation stands unchanged, we will miss several opportunities of construction and development and we will remain far behind the rest of the world in education, science and culture arenas.

We are fully conscious that developing education requires considerable budgets, and that the majority of Arab Islamic countries do not have sufficient resources at their disposal. But that does not mean adopting a passive attitude since it is still possible to start by taking progressive steps provided there is an abundance of political will.

Redressing the current condition of education in our countries also requires separating educational action from trials and overbidding by those who seek to reach personal objectives and gain advantages. Education is the basis on which growth can be achieved in all spheres of life, and a decisive element if not a matter of existence that should accordingly be placed on top of all priorities.

Conclusion:

I wonder what I can possibly add at the end of this study to the theoretical pool of feasible solutions that is at our disposal to improve the condition of education in the Arab Islamic world.

During the last five decades, hundreds of conferences, symposiums, seminars and workshops have been held on education in our countries while thinkers, scholars, writers, and distinguished press and media figures have attempted to outdo each other in putting forward theories and visions and proposing plans, programmes and strategies. During the last few decades, the officials in charge of education in our countries have also undertaken, throughout successive governments, to formulate education policies and have endeavoured to follow up their implementation. Long debates have been conducted within a number of executive bodies and legislative assemblies in Arab Islamic countries on education-related issues. This keen and wide-ranging interest has failed to produce the deep and strong impact which would completely change education systems in such a way that would fulfil our joint ambitions.

We are therefore called upon to reflect on all efforts previously made to reform and develop education in our countries with a view to reaching objectives and opening future prospects sought for the benefit of our Umma.

We firmly believe that paying attention to the development of education should under no circumstances be interpreted as an attempt on our part to respond to external pressure or to please certain quarters, but rather to attend to an internal call originating in our societies, stemming from our conditions, and aimed at achieving prosperity for our Ummah.