

## FINAL PAPER

CSID Sixth Annual Conference

“Democracy and Development: Challenges for the Islamic World”

Washington, DC - April 22 - 23, 2005

“Higher Education, Development and Democracy in the Arab World”

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### I. Introduction

The main focus of this paper is on the quality and the contribution of the university education in the Arab countries to human development and to the democratization processes in these countries.

The present population of the Arab world exceeds 320 million people. The Arab lands contain about two thirds of the proven oil reserves of the world as well as significant amounts of mineral deposits and natural resources. This is in addition to its strategic location and its strategic depth in the non-Arab Muslim world of about one billion people. The Muslim world produces more than two thirds of the world's oil, more than three-fourths of the world's rubber and jute, two thirds of its tin and phosphate. In addition the Muslim world produces significant quantities of cotton, wool, tea, coffee, uranium, magnesium, cobalt and other minerals. In spite of these seemingly vast wealth and riches, the combined GDP of the Arab countries is less than that of Italy and the combined GDP of all the Muslim countries is less than that of Germany (Arab Countries included).

The combined GDP of the Arab states in 2002 was \$712.3 billion U.S. dollars (USD) and that of Italy was \$1183.3 billion USD. When converted to parity purchasing power (PPP) the figures become \$1,466 billion and \$1,524.7 billion USD respectively. The PPP GDP per capita in the Arab world in 2002 was \$5,069 USD compared to the world average of \$7,804 USD and \$7,223 USD for Latin America and the Caribbean. The Human Development Index for the Arab world was 0.651 compared to the world average of 0.729 and 0.777 for Latin America and the Caribbean. <sup>(1)</sup> This obvious paradox is mainly due to the fact that the Arab and the Muslim world have been confined to the production of exhaustible raw materials and extractive economies. Their development plans and models have thus far prevented their industrialization and economic integration and indeed glued them to be satellites and subsidiaries to the economies of the industrialized nations.

What about the educational system and the educational institutions!? How far have they developed?

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The number of the educational institutions has multiplied in the Arab countries since their political independence! Did they? The figures show that in the year 200 there were more than 192 universities, 854 two-year colleges and 539 technical institutes in the Arab countries.

The number of University students rose from less than half a million in 1970 to more than 4 millions in 1998 and it is expected to reach more than 5.6 million in 2015. The adult literacy rate in 2002 was 63.3% and the combined gross enrollment for all levels of education was 60%, the rates for Latin America and the Caribbean were 88.6% and 81% respectively (2). The educational and the human development indices of the Arab countries lag behind other countries indicating the relative wellbeing of the Arab masses is deteriorating.

In the Arab world there are no other institutions whose human resources are as qualified, healthy, motivated and committed as the universities. The university culture is relatively more likely to cultivate free, analytical and critical thinking than any other sub-culture in the society at large. In short, the university is a microcosm of the best, most energetic and highest potential section of the society. It is reasonable to expect the universities to be the beacons of enlightenment, development and democracy and not warehouses of raw materials and mere producers of "inputs" for the visible and invisible hands in the controlled markets of globalization.

It is with this background that the following questions are posed. Comprehensive answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this presentation; this writer only attempts a partial survey. The questions are:

1. To what extent has the Arab universities articulated and clearly defined their mission and their objectives?
2. From what ideological, intellectual world-view and frame of reference do the Arab universities base their vision and formulate their priorities and objectives?
3. Have the Arab universities contributed more towards the invigoration and empowerment of the Arab-Muslim value system and culture of towards the alienation of its staff, faculty and students?
4. Is a university education a right of the qualified person or merely a favor and necessary input in fulfilling the objective of producing skilled labor for the market economy?
5. Is the performance of Arab universities evaluated? Who evaluates and what criteria are used?
6. What resources are allocated for research and development and how are research priorities set?

These are only sample questions that deserve serious consideration in any effort to assess the contribution of Arab universities to development and democracy.

## **II. The Quality and Efficacy of University Education in the Arab Countries.**

During the last twenty years, tens of conferences, seminars and workshops have been held study and discuss the university education in the Arab world. The present writer was fortunate in attending some of these conferences and reviewed the proceedings of many more. He was unable to come across any scientific study that exonerates the Arab universities. The main achievements, which are usually highlighted as positive, are quantitative and financial. It is frequently mentioned that the opening of more universities in the Arab countries has provided the opportunity to thousands of poor students who could not have otherwise obtained a university degree. In addition, it is also highlighted that the public and private Arab universities have kept thousands of young people in their home countries, saved millions of dollars from being spent in foreign countries and brought into the concerned country millions of dollars from non-citizens who come to study in these universities. In addition, the Arab universities are credited with providing employment opportunities to thousands of employees. On the other hand, these seemingly worthwhile achievements of the Arab universities are more than outweighed by the negative ramifications of the low quality of their products. Unemployment among university graduates is on the rise and many studies shown that frustration and alienation, social and political, is very prevalent among university students and other university people. The depletion of the Arab countries from large numbers of these most qualified human resources and marginalization and alienation of large segments of those who cannot leave and stay home is a clear indictment to both the political systems in these countries and to the universities which they have molded and manipulated to perpetuate their corruption.

Lest anyone may think that the foregoing description comes from one biased individual, here are only three quotations from two researchers and one top administrator on the quality of university education in the Arab world.

"The Arab world is in deep and total developmental crises. Universities and institutions of higher learning in the Arab world are on a declining track in the quality, the commitment and efficacy of their inputs and their outputs and in their administrative and decision-making centers. They graduate ever-increasing numbers of unqualified degree holders and low quality researcher. They inundate the society with transmitters of information and not scholars; they flood the markets with sound breakers and not professionals. Our university graduates do no fulfill the needs of the Arab world in research and development." (3)

Another university professor includes the following as one conclusion of his research on the "indicators of quality of university education" in his country:

"The quality of research and teaching in our universities is in continuous decline since many many years. The situation is becoming worse since the adoption of the state of the so-called open policies and for political reasons. This was translated into admission of very large numbers to the universities without adequate resources or adequate planning."(4)

In addition to these conclusions by two university professors from different countries, the following is a testimony from the top administrator of the Arab

Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ALESCO). Dr. Muhammad Al-Mili, the director-general of ALESCO stated,

“There has been recently a preponderant assertion that the higher education in the Arab countries is handicapped, quantitatively and qualitatively. It is thinly spread, of low quality and of little contribution of the development of knowledge and its application for development.”<sup>5</sup>

I could cite numerous other quotations from university presidents, from parents, from students and leaders of industry and civic organizations, all to the effect of low quality of higher education in the Arab countries. What are the main weaknesses that these different researchers and administrators identify as typical of the Arab universities? The following is a partial list:

- 1) The Arab universities have been reduced to importers and distributors of information and not of knowledge and science. In the midst of successive I.T. revolutions, we are flooded with information but thirsting for knowledge and science.
- 2) The domination of the market-economy ethics and norms has derailed the universities from their civilization mission. The markets, which the Arab universities are under pressure to produce inputs for, are controlled by visible and invisible hands and corporations whose interests are incongruent with the needs and interests of the masses.
- 3) The Arab universities have largely adopted the secular systems and paradigms of higher education, conceived and developed in different cultures and economies with very little or no modifications to suit the cultural, social-political and economic uniqueness of the Arab world.
- 4) Most Arab universities have lost their autonomy and their intellectual freedom. They have become institutions that duplicate and reinforce the prevalent social-political power structure. Most appointments at the high administrative levels in the Arab universities are on self-serving political considerations and are not based on professional qualifications. Frequently, the university is run more like a police state than an institution of academic learning.
- 5) The Arab universities have not developed systems of assessment and evaluation of their performance. Only on the last few years few Arab universities have reluctantly initiated some steps for assessment and evaluation. We are still waiting to see how far the influential powers will allow this process to go.

At this point a relevant question needs to be raised; if practically every party in the Arab university (the teaching staff, the students, the administrators and others) complain about the deterioration of the quality of university education, who then is responsible for this situation? The blaming game is an open-ended scene and thus far no authority is willing to assume the leadership in reversing the trend.

### III. The Frustration of Democracy and Development in the Arab World

A persistent question among all those concerned or interested in the Arab world relates to a valid explanation of the seemingly scant chances for democracy and development to flourish and prosper in the Arab countries.

Among the most widely and wildly paraded explanations are those rooted in the theories of cultural determinism. The 2004 Human Development Report identifies five myths that have been largely accepted as premises in respect to the relationship between culture, democracy and development. One of these mythical premises reads as follows: "Some cultures are more likely to make developmental progress than others and some cultures have inherent democratic values while others do not, so there is a trade-off between accommodating cultures and promoting development and democracy." (6)

The connection between cultural bigotry and tyranny can be very close. Myths and prejudices couched in quasi-scientific language and paraded by highly positioned and powerful individuals can easily become blueprints for hegemonistic strategies and aggressive colonial policies and actions.

Cultural determinism as Amartya Sen (2002, 2004) has ably revealed has enormous intuitive appeal. Paraphrasing his words, "complicated theory can sometimes bolster uncomplicated bigotry and make the world a more combustible place than it would otherwise be. Rapid-fire cultural generalizations can displace a deeper understanding of culture and serve as a tool of sectarian prejudice, social discrimination and even political tyranny." (7) How else could Nazism, Fascism and other (isms) take hold of the imagination and loyalties of millions of followers who have caused millions of casualties and are still causing suffering for other millions?!

As Richard Lebow has argued, poverty in Ireland and the Irish famines of the 1840's were widely viewed in England as caused by laziness, indifference and ineptitude of the Irish people so that "Britain's mission" was not seen to be to alleviate the Irish distress but to "civilize her people and lead them to feel and act like human beings."

Similar uses of cultural prejudices for political economic and colonialist objectives are abundant in the history of European empires in Africa and Asia. Presently it is the U.S.A. who is employing this "civilization and democratization" mission in her relationship with the Arab and the Muslim world. Winston Churchill's infamous remark that the Bengal Famines of the 1943 were caused by the tendency of people there to "breed like rabbits" belongs to this tradition of blaming the colonial victims. (8) Cultural critiques of the victims are being used by the rulers and by their foreign masters to justify inefficient as well as corrupt and corrupting tyrannies.

When Max Weber's thesis on the role of Protestant ethic in the growth of capitalist economies was undermined by the faster growth in Catholic countries, France and Italy, than in the Protestant Britain and Germany, the theory was expanded to mean Christian and Western. Yet in spite of the additional empirical evidence provided by rapid economic growth of Japan, the Republic of Korea,

Thailand, Malaysia, China and other East Asian countries, there are still those who emphasize the monopoly of the West on the values of development.<sup>(9)</sup>

As with the notion that certain cultures are incompatible with development, a new wave in the American scene is holding sway that it is the Arab-Islamic culture and values that breed intolerance and authoritarian political systems. Thanks to prominent scholars such as Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington and others, the Arabs and Muslims are profiled as the major threat to the Western civilization and culture. This position has accelerated the implementation of an American policy described by one prominent ex-official of the American administration in a very recent seminar in a prominent American university as follows: There are only two choices to deal with terrorism, either to act too late or to act too early. The former is based on prosecution, and the latter is based on prevention and in both cases you will be criticized and then he added, how could you prosecute someone who is willing to die when committing his action? Needless to say that this simple reasoning received applause.<sup>(10)</sup>

This is the kind of intuitive appeal, prejudice and bigotry cushioned in patriotic zeal and “common sense” that may indeed actualize a self-fulfilling prophecy of clash of civilizations. What principles, legal or otherwise, might be brought to justify the punishment of whole peoples, indeed millions of them, because of the inability to prosecute the few individual culprits who presumably come from these countries and among these peoples?

Such theories and policies will most likely fuel violent reactions that will heighten tensions both within and between nations.

#### **IV. Conclusions and Positions**

- 1) It is the conviction of this writer that cultural and ethnic diversity within the same country and in the whole world is a blessing and not a curse. Unities in diversity are richer and have more vigor and potential for progress and development than unity in homogeneity. As various cultures and races have built in the past various civilizations which later civilizations benefited from, so do various cultures of today’s humanities can build various civilizations who, blessed with wise and compassionate intellectual and political leaders, can live in harmony and cooperation and not in clash and confrontation.
- 2) The Arab-Islamic culture is not a static monolithic culture nor is other cultures. The Arabic-Islamic culture has been and is a diversified culture where many sub-cultures foster and enrich it. Explanation of the backwardness of many Arab and Muslim countries is not to be sought in their cultures but rather in the internal and external powers and forces that have aligned themselves to retard or prevent political, social and economic development.
- 3) In respect to democracy and development in the Arab countries, this writer concurs with Dewey when in wrote in the 1920s: “Politics is the shadow cast on society by big business,” and as long as this is so “attenuation of the shadow will not change the substance.” Dewey went on to say, which is as true in 2005,

“Power today resides in control of the means of production, exchange, publicity, transportation and communication. Whoever owns them rules the life of the country, even if democratic forms remain. Business for private profit through private control of banking, land, industry reinforced by command of the press, press agents and other means of publicity and propaganda, that is the system of actual power, the source of coercion and control and until it’s unraveled we can’t talk seriously about democracy and freedom.”<sup>(11)</sup>

Free and democratic education cannot flourish in a feudalistic non-democratic economic and political system.

- 4) Human development and democracy in the Arab countries are highly correlated with the quality of higher education. They both require revolutionary and simultaneous reforms in the two subsystems of the society, namely: the **knowledge system** and the **political system**. These reforms cannot and will not be brought about by foreign powers even when they are well intentioned and not driven by imperialist ambitions. The Arabs and Muslims need to bring about, through their own suffering and struggles, intellectual and political leadership able, sincere and committed to work in partnership to bring about the best in this Ummah.

*Oh God, give the wretched of the earth great leaders a time like this demands.  
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands  
Men whom the lust of office does not kill  
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy  
Men who possess opinions and will  
Men who have honor, men who do not lie  
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog in public duty and in private life.  
(J.G. Holland)*

Amen.

(21 April, 2005)

## Endnotes

1. These figures were derived from various tables in the Human Development Report 2004, UNDP, New York, USA, Tables 1-10, pp 139-174
2. Ibid.
3. Abdul Qader Ramzi, 2000, “The University in the Arab World: Ideology, Scientific Research and Development.” (In Arabic). The Jordan Journal for Applied Sciences, Human Sciences Issue. Vol III, No. 4, September 2000. Jordan University for Applied Sciences, p: 29.
4. Murad S. Zaidan, 1999, “Indicators of Quality in the Egyptian University Education,” Conference on Development of University Education. An Outlook for the Future, 22-24, May 1999, Cairo University, p: 5.
5. Muhammed Al-Mili, “On the Arab Higher Education” in Omar Ash-Shaikh and A.R. Adas, (1998), A Systematic Guide for Self Evaluation of the Higher

Education Institutions, The Arab Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ALESCO), Tunis, p: 9.

6. Human Development Report 2004, op cit, p: 4.
7. Amartya Sen, 2004, "Civilization Imprisonments: How to Misunderstand Everybody in the World," The New Republic, 10 June 2004 quoted in Human Development Report 2004, p: 4.
8. Quoted in Human Development Report 2004, p: 18.
9. These notions and the other related "myths" are eloquently analyzed and refuted in the Human Development Report 2004**the**, pp: 1-26.
10. The present writer followed this presentation on American Television on Sunday 17 April, 2005 of former United States Attorney General, John Ashcroft.
11. Quoted in Noam Chomsky, "Democracy and Education." Mellon Lecture, Loyola University, Chicago, 19 October 1994, p: 6, [www.zmag.org/chomsky/talks/9410education.html](http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/talks/9410education.html).