



**2017 - 2018**

**Model Arab League**

**BACKGROUND GUIDE**

**Council of Social Affairs Ministers**

**[ncusar.org/modelarableague](http://ncusar.org/modelarableague)**



**Original draft by Michael Ader, Chair of the Council of Social Affairs Ministers at the 2018 National University Model Arab League, with contributions from the dedicated staff and volunteers at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations.**

Honorable Delegates,

I am excited to welcome you all to the Council of Arab Social Affairs Ministers. My name is Michael Ader, and I will be your Chair at the National University Model Arab League Conference. I am a senior at the University of Utah, with a Major in Middle East Studies – Arabic, and a Minor in History. I was previously chair at the Rocky Mountain Model Arab League conference at Metropolitan State University in Colorado, and this will be my first experience as chair at the National level. It is a bittersweet moment as I write this background guide, since after 3 years of participating in Arab League, I now will be finishing my time with MAL. I am particularly happy however, that I get to depart as chair with the same council where my experience began back in 2015. My whole experience with Model Arab League has been exciting, challenging, but most of all a rewarding way to test my knowledge and perceptions of Middle Eastern issues, and I hope it proves just as valuable for your understanding of the region.

The Social Affairs Council is generally regarded as a council that can operate with a lower level of contention than others, but one which comes with a more complex ultimatum. As a Social Affairs minister, you are representing not just the will of your government, but also the immediate needs of the people you speak for. You might have to take into account the lives of urban Baghdadis, or consider the issues faced by marshland Arabs, and even have to ask yourself what groups of people, you as a member of your government, might not wish to represent. Model Arab League is not about doing the most good, so much is it is representing the real-life demands of your State. There is room to input your own flavor into your State's policy, and I encourage you to do so, but remember you represent a diverse population of people with views and experiences that are not always easy to tease out.

While you conduct your research for this Council, seek out information about your government's stance, but additionally find the opinions of your people. Watch videos of protests and look at what demands are being made. If you speak Arabic, listen to BBC Arabic and hear what call-ins have to say, look at blogs, twitter and read editorials, and try developing an image of who you are advocating for. Once you decide on the needs of your people, filter them through what you learn about your government and form a firm stance on how you should debate in council. Model Arab League is only valuable if you represent the true values of your country. You will learn little and takeaway nothing if you stick to preconceived ideals of Western democracy and morality. Become your country, think like its leaders, and most of all, ask yourself what your people need most.

I look forward to meeting many of you in Washington DC, but until then, good luck and

مع السلامة!

Michael Ader

ميخائيل ايدر

## **Topic I: Formulating methods to relieve increased strain on public infrastructure as a result of urban overpopulation**

### **I. Introduction**

#### **A. General Background**

Population growth and inefficient public infrastructure is not a new issue in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), but the scale of the issue has grown to such a point as to need immediate attention. Urban population growth in the region has varied widely throughout the years, and with massive swings in the growth rate, it has been hard to plan how infrastructure will react. Currently, most MENA states seem to be drifting toward a massive 2% population growth rate, far above Western developed nations.<sup>1</sup> This massive rate of growth can be equated to improvements in healthcare, diet and in large part by effective infrastructure programs; however, these improvements have not always been uniform, or continuous. The Middle East is not alone in enduring the effects of overpopulation. Many regions experience a difficulty sustaining the growth of their countries. To this regard, the initiation of population growth is more simple than maintaining the growth through urban development.<sup>2</sup>

Past programs have created massive rates of growth, but infrastructure has failed to match growth rates, with ongoing conflicts reducing the ability of many MENA states to provide services. Currently, public transportation, water, internet, sanitation and healthcare are areas where infrastructure is most needed. It is valuable to keep in mind that improving infrastructure is vital for the stability of the region, especially since service disparities can easily ferment social unrest which destroys existing projects and halts future development.

#### **B. History in the Arab World**

The modern MENA region has experienced several periods of massive infrastructure investment and improvements which have resulted in today's urban overpopulation and strain on services. The Aswan High Dam, completed in 1970, helped to increase Egypt's growth rate from 2.2% in 1970 to over 2.8% in 1987.<sup>3</sup> Similar projects and outcomes can be seen in Saddam Hussein-era Iraq, where roads, electrical grids and dams were popular projects undertaken by the Baathist regime. Today, dictatorial governments – which can unilaterally and effectively move massive projects ahead – are less prevalent in the Arab world than in the past. As a result, the massive population which resulted from old mega-projects now demands services which many states are slow to implement or unable to afford. The problem of failing infrastructure, however, is not always uniform; there are some regions, specifically the Gulf, that have experienced an infrastructure boom in recent years at a rate so fast that demand has outstripped what the market can supply.

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<sup>1</sup> Population growth (annual %)." World Bank, 2015, data.worldbank.org/indicator. Accessed 28 June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Abed, George T., and Hamid R. Davoodi. "Challenges of Growth and Globalization in the Middle East and North Africa." International Monetary Fund. 2003. Accessed August 17, 2017. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/med/2003/eng/abed.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Population growth (annual %)." World Bank, 2015, data.worldbank.org/indicator. Accessed 28 June 2017.

Although the MENA region has a long history of megaprojects being undertaken by individual states, the time for such enterprises has passed. Lower oil prices mean that many governments have less money and slower bureaucracies which have failed to maintain developments. Despite many challenges, there are more opportunities for transregional infrastructure projects which can be facilitated by the Arab League; although, there are several hurdles that must be overcome. Delays or cancellations are extremely common in infrastructure projects, and in a survey by PwC, a business consulting company, 95% of respondents reported delays in infrastructure projects in the region, 45% stating that delays went on longer than 6 months.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, poor planning and lack of regulations are problematic since money is often provided for projects before the program has been significantly developed. The failures of Iraq's power grid are a good example of what happens when money, rather than expertise, is the main driver in infrastructure planning.<sup>5</sup> Ideally, if states work together there will be increased efficiency and regulation, as multiple states would be monitoring how their contributions are utilized.

### **C. Finding Solutions to the Problem: Past, Present and Future**

The threat of overpopulation is one of importance, and there is no denying the challenges MENA governments face to combat this dilemma. There is no question that the region has made attempts to move forward in the development of increased infrastructure. However, the rooted cause of these problems has not been addressed. Members of this council may want to explore institutional reforms that may assist in the implementation and the acceleration of regional development.

Although the Arab League is not responsible for empowering infrastructure development for every Arab state, especially when it comes to smaller municipal projects, there are potential and ongoing opportunities to renew the region, especially in large, international cities. Already in the Gulf, there is a massive push to create a cross-border electricity-sharing agreement to move electricity whenever there is slack in one system and demand in another.<sup>6</sup> Water, oil and gas pipelines, transport, joint science ventures and high-tech telecommunications are easy avenues for states to form partnerships, but real effort needs to be invested into the construction of collaboration. Deciding how much each state contributes will create conflict, but it is part of ensuring partnerships are equal and equitable. Resolutions should clearly frame how the citizens of each country will benefit, and whether improvements will continue as the population grows so as not to renew past problems later on.

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<sup>4</sup> Everington, John Everington. "Concern over capacity for infrastructure projects in Middle East." The National, 28 June 2014, [www.thenational.ae/business/industry-insights/economics/concern-over-capacity-for-infrastructure-projects-in-middle-east](http://www.thenational.ae/business/industry-insights/economics/concern-over-capacity-for-infrastructure-projects-in-middle-east). Accessed 28 June 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Khatteeb, Luay, and Harry Istepanian. TURN A LIGHT ON: ELECTRICITY SECTOR REFORM IN IRAQ. Brookings Institute, Mar. 2015, [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Alkhatteeb-Istepanian-English-PDF.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Alkhatteeb-Istepanian-English-PDF.pdf). Accessed 30 June 2017.

<sup>6</sup> "Integration of Electricity Networks in the Arab World : Regional Market Structure and Design." World Bank, 2013, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/19329>. Accessed 30 June 2017.

## II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- What types of infrastructure projects are most conducive for cross-border partnerships?
- Does my state need new infrastructure, or will my role be geared toward facilitating others?
- Which sectors of my state's infrastructure need improvement, and why?
- What is my state most able to provide when forming transnational infrastructure partnerships, i.e., money, labor, equipment?

## III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- What regulatory issues need to be discussed to ensure resources are shared equally?
- How effectively will infrastructure projects support populations over a multi-decade timeline?
- How could municipal projects piggyback off of international agreements?
- Are there resource gaps or supply imbalances in your resolutions, i.e., too much money and too few workers, vice versa, etc.?
- Will this resolution negatively affect local peoples? If so, do the benefits outweigh the harm?
- Could this resolution resolve regulation and partnership issues in infrastructure programs which already exist or are being planned?

## IV. Additional Resources

[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMNAREGTOPWATRES/Resources/Water\\_Sector\\_Brief-Fall2010.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMNAREGTOPWATRES/Resources/Water_Sector_Brief-Fall2010.pdf)

*This is a good resource to understand the water situation in the region. There are several unresolved problems mentioned in this text that the majority of MENA states experience and could work together to resolve.*

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/05/why-infrastructure-is-key-to-a-stable-middle-east/>

*Important financing information is discussed in this article, and how states have dealt with not having the funds for vital projects. There are major investment opportunities that will be created by infrastructure partnerships, and resolutions should look how to encourage public and private investment while reducing risk to investors.*

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/415281468059650302/pdf/ACS71240ESW0WH0I0a-nd0II000Final0PDF.pdf>

*This is a fairly hefty document prepared by the World Bank, but it encompasses a major portion of shared electricity infrastructure in the MENA. Ideally, reading all of it would provide a comprehensive understanding of how these types of projects function, but realistically cherry picking from sections will also be helpful in understanding what a resolution needs to address.*

<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-38571240>

*This article relates to the UK and not the MENA, however it should be used as a reminder to think beyond traditional infrastructure goals. Projects like the Swansea Lagoon are novel, but effective. In your research, look out for serious projects like this one that have been or will be built.*

## **Topic II: Examining methods to address rising public health concerns in the Arab world, with a focus on enhancing mental health care and awareness, curbing infectious diseases such as HIV, and improving chronic disease care**

### **I. Introduction**

#### **A. General Background**

Public health across the Middle East and North Africa, is one of the great success stories in the world. Communicable diseases have been declining across the region, and old animal borne diseases like Leishmaniasis, which used to cause thousands of deaths per year, have been falling in almost every state thanks to an increased effort to eradicate disease vectors.<sup>7</sup> There have also been similar improvements in healthcare which have resulted in fewer deaths in both children and new mothers, lower rates of chronic malnutrition, and higher hygiene standards.<sup>8</sup> Life expectancy has similarly mirrored the improving health landscape, moving from roughly 46 years in the 1960s, to over 73 years in 2015, resulting in a population and economic boom which is now spurring new health challenges in the MENA region.<sup>9</sup>

With a general improvement in economic standards across the Middle East and North Africa, there has been an explosion of what are often termed “Western diseases” which have come as a side effect of globalization and increasing economic prosperity.<sup>10</sup> With more access to nutrition and lower-energy jobs, MENA populations are experiencing increasing rates of heart disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity. There has also been a concerning explosion of drug usage across the region which has been accompanied by an outbreak in AIDs cases, something that was not as serious of a threat to the region in the past.<sup>11</sup> These threats are compounded by the initial and continuing lack of education on preventative measures such as diet and exercise, safe sex and regular disease screening. There is considerable effort that needs to be invested in stalling these new diseases; however, it is vital to keep in mind that endemic disease threats in the region such as Malaria, Leishmaniasis, Schistosomiasis, Cholera and Polio are often quick to emerge in conflict situations and an increased effort to reduce their spread is needed.

#### **B. History of the Arab World**

Because of the economic, geographic, and political variation in the MENA region, looking at how to combat disease cannot be done holistically, and investigating the regional variation in

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<sup>7</sup> Ghedin, Elodie, editor. Leishmaniasis in the Middle East: Incidence and Epidemiology. NCBI, 8 Oct. 2014, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4183486/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4183486/). Accessed 28 May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> "In Middle East and North Africa, Health Challenges are Becoming Similar to those in Western Countries." World Bank, 4 Sept. 2013, [www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/09/04/iddle-east-north-Africa-health-challenges-similar-western-countries](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/09/04/iddle-east-north-Africa-health-challenges-similar-western-countries). Accessed 28 May 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Middle East & North Africa. World Bank, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/region/middle-east-and-north-africa>. Accessed 28 May 2017.

<sup>10</sup> "In Middle East and North Africa, Health Challenges are Becoming Similar to Those in Western Countries." World Bank, 4 Sept. 2013, [www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/09/04/middle-east-north-Africa-health-challenges-similar-western-countries](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/09/04/middle-east-north-Africa-health-challenges-similar-western-countries). Accessed 28 May 2017.

<sup>11</sup> HIV in the Middle East: Low Prevalence but Not Low Risk." PRB, [www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2013/hiv-aids-in-middle-east.aspx](http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2013/hiv-aids-in-middle-east.aspx). Accessed 29 May 2017.

needs and circumstances is essential. There is a massive difference between the health needs of the Gulf, those of North Africa, or in the Levant.

Looking particularly towards the Gulf, there has been a massive surge in caloric intake since the 1970s which has been blamed for the 40% obesity rate in women in major oil-exporting states.<sup>12</sup> The issue of poor diets and lack of health knowledge has grown to such proportions that 47% of the region's diseases are now non-communicable, with heart disease up 44%, stroke increasing by 35% and diabetes up over 87% in the last few decades.<sup>13</sup> There has been a lack of health monitoring in the region which would otherwise slow the advance of diet-related disease, and a general ignorance of the importance of exercise in newly-urbanized areas where obesity and heart disease are on the rise.

Of the other major health issues in the region, HIV is a growing concern for the Middle East. Although HIV may exist at lower rates in the Middle East than anywhere else in the world, new infection rates have far exceeded all other regions. New infections are up 52% across the Middle East, but for children, that rate has increased by 73% and threatens to become one of the most pressing issues facing Arab healthcare systems. The leading causes of new HIV infections stem from increased prostitution and drug injectors.<sup>14</sup> There has been a particularly high rate of HIV in both Libya and Iran. Although Iran is not part of the Arab League, the country could act as an infection pool, spilling into Iraq and Syria where an outbreak could be dire.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental health concerns are additional issues that need to be addressed in the region. There is a serious shortage of resources available for individuals suffering from mental health diseases, which is aggravated by cultural stigmas of addressing mental health. The breadth of this issue is also distressingly large and growing. A report from the World Health Organization stated that mental health issues are found in 17% of Iraqis, while other reports place that number as high as 50%. In even more violence-prone areas such as the Gaza Strip, nearly 98% of children were found to suffer from symptoms akin to PTSD.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, despite the large number of individuals that need mental healthcare, most countries provide few resources. In Sudan and Somalia, there are only an estimated 5 beds per 100,000 individuals reserved for mental healthcare purposes. In Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, there is a worrying lack of psychiatrists, numbering perhaps .5 per 100,000 people. Few Arab states publish their expenditures on mental health, but budgets are extremely low. Egypt and Qatar are reported to spend 1% of their healthcare budget on

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<sup>12</sup> Sibai, Abla Mehio, et al. "Nutrition Transition and Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors in Middle East and North Africa Countries: Reviewing the Evidence." *Annals of Nutrition and Metabolism*, vol. 57, no. 193, 2010, pp. 193-203, DOI:10.1159/000321527. Accessed 29 May 2017.

<sup>13</sup> "In Middle East and North Africa, Health Challenges are Becoming Similar to Those in Western Countries." World Bank, 4 Sept. 2013, [www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/09/04/middle-east-north-Africa-health-challenges-similar-western-countries](http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/09/04/middle-east-north-Africa-health-challenges-similar-western-countries). Accessed 28 May 2017.

<sup>14</sup> "HIV in the Middle East: Low Prevalence but Not Low Risk." PRB, [www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2013/hiv-aids-in-middle-east.aspx](http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2013/hiv-aids-in-middle-east.aspx). Accessed 29 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> "Hidden Afflictions: Mental Illness in the Middle East." Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 Oct. 2010, [www.csis.org/analysis/hidden-afflictions-mental-illness-middle-east](http://www.csis.org/analysis/hidden-afflictions-mental-illness-middle-east). Accessed 19 June 2017.



mental health, while Palestine spends an impressive 2.5% -- which is still small compared to developed nations with proportional spending in the mid-teens.<sup>16 17</sup>

### **C. Finding Solutions to the Problem: Past, Present and Future**

Although the problems facing Arab health systems are numerous, many solutions can be adapted from other regions that have already faced similar problems. Increasing budgets are of course a viable option, but looking into League-wide health initiatives would be similarly useful. Health campaigns may be examined to determine their benefit for the League. In addition the council should examine how to increase screening for “Western” diseases and other communicable diseases to prevent them before they emerge. Although animal-borne and communicable disease are on the decline, they quickly flare in conflict zones, and more effort needs to be invested in quicker responses, better immunization programs and general disease monitoring. Although the health issues facing the area are dire, as a delegate you have limitless possibilities to make life better in the region.

Mental health concerns need to be addressed by exploring ways to reduce stigmas and potentially increase funding, as well as incorporating treatment programs into mainstream healthcare systems. Increased social action and treatment stockpiles may aid in combatting healthcare concerns such as HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

#### **II. Questions to Consider in Your Research**

- Are there healthcare concerns my country has historically not been willing to discuss based on social or religious attitudes?
- What are the most pressing healthcare needs in my country?
- Are there underlying social problems that are causing a particular health concern, and if so, would it be more effective to combat the disease, or the underlying issue?
- What other regions in the world have faced similar problems, and how – if at all – have they resolved them?

#### **III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer**

- What measures are necessary to ensure healthcare is improved uniformly across the varied MENA regions?
- What are effective ways to improve healthcare monitoring in regions with poor infrastructure?
- What are ways to ensure that unforeseen health crises are quickly dealt with to decrease loss of life?

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<sup>16</sup> Okasha, Ahmed, et al. "Mental health services in the Arab world." NCIB, National Institute of Health, Feb. 2012, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3266748/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3266748/). Accessed 19 June 2017.

<sup>17</sup> El-Geressi, Yasmine. "The Silent Crisis in the Middle East." Majalla, 5 Apr.2017, [eng.majalla.com/2017/04/article55253284/silent-crisis-middle-east](http://eng.majalla.com/2017/04/article55253284/silent-crisis-middle-east). Accessed 19 June 2017.

- How can partnerships with existing governments and NGOs be utilized and integrated to in new health policy?

#### IV. Additional Resources

<http://www.globalhealthmiddleeast.com/access-to-mental-health-care-in-the-middle-east/>

*This is a good resource for mental health issues. The overview delves into social stigmas, ongoing problems and ways that countries can move ahead to improve treatment. It also touches on particular social issues in the region that would be highly useful in understanding when creating policy.*

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/04/25/syrias-mental-health-crisis/>

*This is an excellent source from the Brookings Institute on mental health issues in Syria. Although it only addresses one region, problems will emerge in any region experiencing similar problems. Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Palestine would likely have similar needs as those faced by people in Syria facing mental health issues.*

<http://www.prb.org/Publications/Reports/2014/middle-east-hiv-aids.aspx>

*For dealing with the issue of rising HIV infections in the MENA, this site has laid out considerable data, as well as background information and possible avenues for improving HIV treatment.*

<http://www.globalhealthmiddleeast.com/obesity-in-the-middle-east/>

*For obesity and “Western” disease issues, this is a broad, yet informative guide to the issues you are up against. Additionally, the end of the document provides good sources that can further inform your research.*

### **Topic III: Addressing the rising cost of food in the Arab world, with an emphasis on reducing waste in the import, transportation, and production of food, as well as inefficiencies in government subsidies.**

#### **I. Introduction**

##### **A. General Background**

Food prices across the world have been rising significantly since the turn of the millennium, with prices almost doubling in the last 17 years.<sup>18</sup> High food prices have been extremely damaging to developing nations, particularly in the MENA, where food production is largely not possible due to geographic considerations and hindrances. Some regions like Egypt, Iraq and Syria are able to develop strong agricultural sectors, but most areas are not. Droughts and heatwaves have also been more common in recent decades, both inside and outside the MENA region, meaning shortages cannot always be resolved through outside purchase.<sup>19</sup> The MENA region today has to import over 50% of its food supply, both through foreign aid and direct purchases, but the changing dynamic of the regions has made this process more complex to the point that current supply networks are failing to fully meet market demand.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, many of the former food-producing regions like Iraq, Syria and Egypt have experienced significant turmoil in previous decades that has taken away their ability to produce goods. An additional factor in shortages is that, although oil prices have been lower since 2015 – resulting in reduced fertilizer and operations costs – governments that rely on high oil prices to support subsidies have been unable to continue propping up food markets which developed under the expectation that oil prices would remain high. Although the region as a whole is not conducive to agriculture, there is more that can be done collectively by the Arab states to ensure that food prices and supply remain stable.

##### **B. History of the Arab World**

The Arab Spring was not largely framed in relation to food prices, but this moment in MENA history is where the issue of food shortages began to take on a greater importance. Calls for democracy and government reform were coupled with demands for action to be taken to reduce rising food costs; however, the issue of food prices had been developing for several years before that. Food prices rose significantly between 2007 and 2008 with Egypt alone being hit with nearly a 40% increase in prices.<sup>21</sup> Following cost increases, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain and Egypt saw a massive increase in food-related riots, with many of these states, like Jordan, still experiencing riots today.<sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> Tunisia, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have also seen more protests calling for lower food prices and more effective government subsidies.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "World Food Situation." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, UN, 7 June 2017, [www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/](http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/). Accessed 21 July 2017.

<sup>19</sup> "Drought a threat to food prices in Middle East." The National, 10 Mar. 2014, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/drought-a-threat-to-food-prices-in-middle-east-1.580916>. Accessed 21 July 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Mortada, Dalia. "Did Food Prices Spur the Arab Spring?" PBS, 7 Sept. 2011, [www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/world-july-dec11-food\\_09-07/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/world-july-dec11-food_09-07/). Accessed 21 July 2017.

<sup>21</sup> "Let them eat baklava." The Economist, 17 Mar. 2012, [www.economist.com/node/21550328](http://www.economist.com/node/21550328). Accessed 21 July 2017.

<sup>22</sup> "Let them eat baklava." The Economist, 17 Mar. 2012, [www.economist.com/node/21550328](http://www.economist.com/node/21550328). Accessed 21 July 2017.

As with many of the issues in the Middle East, oil prices have a massive effect on food prices. Subsidies are the main way that MENA states have kept food prices down to help offset high poverty and low employment. Subsidies in the Arab World reach 22% of government expenditures and represent billions of dollars that go towards fuel, electricity and food.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, falling oil prices have cut deeply into the ability of states to continue to provide subsidies, and food is often an easy part of the budget to cut since it makes up a smaller portion of overall expenditures. Algeria, for example, has seen its oil profits fall so much they have been forced to decrease subsidized goods and begin imposing taxes on goods that had either not been taxed before, or had previously been taxed at an extremely low rate. The addition of taxes and higher costs have driven up prices by factors of three to five on basic staple goods, and resulted in a major increase in social unrest.<sup>26</sup> Many major oil-producing states still appear able to support their food subsidies due to relative wealth in the Gulf region, but other states in the rest of the Arab World have seen Gulf aid decrease or disappear.

### **C. Finding Solutions to the Problem: Past, Present and Future**

Resource waste both through transport inefficiencies and consumer negligence consumes a large portion of food commodities in the region. In the UAE, food waste reaches approximately \$4 billion annually, a massive amount which, if reduced, would help offset the need for subsidies and increase the amount of product in the economy.<sup>27</sup> The combination of a hot climate in the MENA region and long transport distances also means that food is regularly lost in transit. Looking at League-wide efficiency and logistic standards in agriculture, packaging and transport would help reduce losses and keep prices down. Development of smart logistic networks and vehicle standards has been discussed in the Gulf region, but there needs to be discussion as to how to advance these initiatives across the Arab world. Some groups have found that better logistics can keep a considerable amount of perishable goods from spoiling on the way to market.

Subsidy reform is also a policy on the table that should be investigated, even if subsidies are less sustainable than in the past. Readjusting policy to shift subsidies away from downstream consumers to upstream producers would make goods cheaper down the entire pipeline, while also benefiting the population more uniformly.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, water is not sustainably used in agriculture due to large subsidies that encourage waste, meaning when droughts hit the region,

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<sup>23</sup> Abuqudairi, Areej. "Jordanians 'at breaking point' over austerity measures." Al Jazeera, 21 Feb. 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/jordan-worsening-economy-sparks-wave-protest-170221055031620.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/jordan-worsening-economy-sparks-wave-protest-170221055031620.html). Accessed 21 July 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Cambanis, Thanassis. "The Arab Spring was a revolution of the hungry." Boston Globe, [www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2015/08/22/the-arab-spring-was-revolution-hungry/K15S1kGeO5Y6gsJwAYHejI/story.html](http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2015/08/22/the-arab-spring-was-revolution-hungry/K15S1kGeO5Y6gsJwAYHejI/story.html). Accessed 21 July 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Subsidy Reform in the Middle East and North Africa. IMF, 2014. International Monetary Fund, [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/dp/2014/1403mcd.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/dp/2014/1403mcd.pdf). Accessed 21 July 2017.

<sup>26</sup> "Algeria: Soaring Food Prices Fuel Popular Resentment." North Africa Post, 31 Mar. 2017, [northafricapost.com/17131-algeria-soaring-food-prices-fuel-popular-resentment.html](http://northafricapost.com/17131-algeria-soaring-food-prices-fuel-popular-resentment.html). Accessed 22 July 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Jacotine, Sarah. "ANALYSIS: Food logistics in the Middle East." Arab Supply Chain, 13 July 2105, [www.arabiansupplychain.com/article-11571-analysis-food-logistics-in-the-middle-east/](http://www.arabiansupplychain.com/article-11571-analysis-food-logistics-in-the-middle-east/). Accessed 14 July 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Mortada, Dalia. "Did Food Prices Spur the Arab Spring?" PBS, 7 Sept. 2011, [www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/world-july-dec11-food\\_09-07/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/world-july-dec11-food_09-07/). Accessed 21 July 2017.

agriculture is quick to fail since conservation practices have never been needed. Luckily for the Arab states, there is considerable slack in the MENA food market that has gone under-utilized and undeveloped thanks to poorly-directed subsidies and practices. Creating new strategies is vital for continued economic growth and the political stability of the region.

## II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- What is the subsidy structure in my country and how does it affect food prices?
- What food does my country produce, what does it consume and what are the inherent problems in my region's transport logistics?
- How is climate change going to harm agriculture and prices in my region?
- What international events or practices are causing prices to rise in my state or region?

## III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- How will states pay for developing new food price policies when pan-Arab aid has been falling and often cannot be increased?
- How might efficiency standards be imposed equitably across the region?
- How might the League be able to mitigate social unrest over surging prices until control mechanisms can be put in place?
- How can the League get food aid to areas experiencing extreme shortages caused by price increased and social unrest?
- What are some novel ways that food production might be increased in nominally-agricultural areas?

## IV. Additional Resources

<http://www.fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/EB%20Food%20price%20trends%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa%202011%202%2016.pdf>

*This is a general report from USAID about food price increase in the MENA region. It provides a good overview as to why prices are increasing. There is also some data on how inflation has responded to prices. Although not highly in-depth, this is a good first step to understand the problem.*

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-increases-food-prices-second-time-three-months-1814861743>

*Although specifically about Egypt, this article frames what has been experienced across the MENA as food prices have increased and governments have been unable to provide subsidies. Because of budget deficits Egypt has few options to keep costs down, and the repercussions of this will eventually spur social unrest if it is not addressed. Egypt is a cautionary tale and an example to what can be expected across the region if food issues are not resolved.*

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/famine-united-nations-170310234132946.html>

*The purview of this topic is not to directly address famine, but resolutions could include this under broader umbrellas of supply and efficiency. Better ways of transporting goods could make supplying food to famine hit areas easier, and such practices and strategies will become more necessary as droughts continue to affect regional and world agricultural output. Getting food cheaply and quickly to any region will reduce costs, and working with famine areas now will make the transition easier in the future.*

<http://www.npr.org/2011/02/18/133852810/the-impact-of-rising-food-prices-on-arab-unrest>

*This article covers Arab social issues in relation to food costs as well as how the international community has caused increased prices, but also what they are doing to resolve the issue. Food prices are not just about what is happening inside the MENA, but also what happens abroad. Resolutions might be able to tackle how Arab states are expected to negotiate with outside powers in order to ensure uninterrupted and cheap supply.*

## **Topic IV: Proposing reforms to Arab higher education systems, including investment incentives, vocational training, and curricular developments to promote international recognition and employment prospects.**

### **I. Introduction**

#### **A. General Background**

The Middle East is home to many institutions of higher education spread out from the Gulf, the Levant, and North Africa; however, these institutions often fail to meet the education standards necessary for Arab students to meet job requirements abroad, or even at home. Arab universities rank lower than Western universities with only three represented in rankings of the top 500 universities globally.<sup>29</sup> The reason for this disparity is due, in part, to lack of funding to create world-class institutions, as well as a failure to recruit highly-experienced professors. Universities have also been failing to develop students' ability to use skills and practices that are demanded by the international markets. MENA institutions are criticized for not encouraging students to develop "soft skills" along the lines of critical thinking, teamwork or creativity. This not true for all universities in the region, but the generalization remains.

To resolve these various issues, the Arab League needs to look more closely at how to share resources across a vast region, as well as integrate acceptable educational standards for member states. In order to cut back on growing youth unemployment, mass migration and brain drain, education standards need to match international demand. Additionally, major work should be done to elevate vocational training in the Arab world, since attending university is not always feasible financially, socially and politically. Expanding vocational training would help provide a massive new workforce that could be hireable at home and abroad. Vocationally-trained workers are valuable for building emerging infrastructure in the Arab world, but they could also prove extremely valuable internationally if they are provided high-quality skills that are in demand.

#### **B. History of the Arab World**

In many respects, the Arab world has already laid a strong groundwork for higher education. The World Bank found that over the last 40 years, MENA governments have vastly improved services by investing over 20% of their budgets into education.<sup>30</sup> The Gulf has also had the ability to expand their own universities through oil rents, resulting in many states in the Gulf being known for the quality of their institutions, as well as international connections they have forged with American universities.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Devarajan, Shanta. "The paradox of higher education in MENA." Brookings Institute, 27 June 2016, [www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of-higher-education-in-mena/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of-higher-education-in-mena/). Accessed 31 July 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Galal, Ahmed. "The Road Not Traveled Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa." World Bank, 2008, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/6303/467890PUB0Box31DU1Flagship1Full1ENG.txt?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>. Accessed 31 July 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Ghabra, Shafeeq, and Margreet Arnold. "Studying the American Way." Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2007, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus71FinalWeb.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus71FinalWeb.pdf). Accessed 31 July 2017.

Free or highly discounted education is generally available across the MENA, and there are some non-Gulf states that have experience with western education systems. American Universities in Beirut and Cairo are effective in their teaching methods. Unfortunately, both organizations have been regulated at various times by home governments that are not always comfortable ceding control to administrations, which often act independently of the state. American University in Cairo is obligated to maintain a faculty that is at least 70 percent Egyptian, which is necessary in order to build a domestically-skilled workforce; however, it often forces out quality staff who would have otherwise been employed by the University. Often, policies that are meant to support the home institutions backfire when regulations hold back qualified professionals from importing new systems and approaches from abroad.<sup>32</sup>

Free and open university education does have its implications for the region. High oil prices made it possible to support subsidized education, allowing families to send their children away to study, but accessibility has swelled enrollment rates and produced overcrowding in classrooms. In turn, this created an unfulfillable demand for professors. It is often not possible to fill teaching positions with qualified staff, further increasing classroom loads and decreasing quality of education.<sup>33</sup> The goal of MENA governments has been to create universities that their people could easily attend with the expectation that upon graduation, graduates would immediately find jobs. In reality, this was seldom the ultimate result. The MENA has produced such a large pool of college-educated people that their home countries fail to absorb them. Across the Arab region, it is estimated that 40% of college-educated individuals are unemployed, which shows that the skills they possess are either not marketable, not recognized by employers, or jobs simply are unavailable.<sup>34</sup> Having such a large pool of highly-educated, unemployed people will likely foster an apathy that leads to lower levels of education during a time when the MENA needs more than ever to develop a workforce that has expertise beyond petroleum production. An additional concern is that unemployed and underemployed graduates are increasingly likely to seek social and political change to achieve progress in their lives. This frustration from the educated class was one of many factors that some have suggested led to the initial unrest in Syria and elsewhere.

Finally, there has historically been a culture in the MENA region that is not conducive to higher education goals. The lack of “soft skills” is just one of the problems attributed to the culture found in many MENA institutions. Curriculum and teaching methods are known to stress to students the importance of not questioning professors, nor debating information that appears untrue, or outdated.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, education takes on a role more geared toward memorizing facts, without a full examination of concepts or analysis. After graduation, students often find it hard to get jobs in creative fields since they predominately have been asked to repeat information, rather than produce it. The League might consider finding methods to redirect

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<sup>32</sup> Ghabra, Shafeeq, and Margreet Arnold. "Studying the American Way." Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2007,

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus71FinalWeb.pdf>. Accessed 31 July 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Altbach, Philip G. "Reforming Higher Education in the Middle East and Elsewhere." *International Higher Education*, no. 64, Summer 2011, pp. 2-3, [www.ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/viewFile/8566/7699](http://www.ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/viewFile/8566/7699). Accessed 31 July 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Devarajan, Shanta. "The paradox of higher education in MENA." Brookings Institute, 27 June 2016, [www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of-higher-education-in-mena/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of-higher-education-in-mena/). Accessed 31 July 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Devarajan, Shanta. "The paradox of higher education in MENA." Brookings Institute, 27 June 2016, [www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of-higher-education-in-mena/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/06/27/the-paradox-of-higher-education-in-mena/). Accessed 31 July 2017.



curricula that already operate on this structure, and bring in outside help to ensure that reforms will effectively change educational standards.

### **C. Finding Solutions to the Problem: Past, Present and Future**

Although Arab education systems face many problems, there is massive political will to fix failing practices. Unemployment threatens to destabilize the region, and the seeming end of massive oil profits is forcing diversification and a demand for educated workers.

The Arab League needs to put significant effort into strengthening domestic institutions to produce a supply of workers who have the skills needed by increasingly globalized and demanding institutions. Funneling money into educational institutions is important, but the League should look into identifying standards vital for modern higher education.

More incentives need to be devised to bring scholars to the MENA, as well as stem the brain drain that is taking qualified Arabs out of where they are needed. Part of reducing brain drain could come from creating stronger long-term learning abroad networks to allow Arab students to leave their institutions for a time, while encouraging them to return with valuable skills and perspectives. Growing strong international linkage is vital for the future of universities, but so are inter-regional links between Arab universities that will encourage more research and information sharing.

A League-wide effort to provide vocational training is important. If growth is to continue, it is vital to have technically-trained domestic workers. Vocational sponsorship programs have provided some benefit in the past, but there is a massive risk that workers come away having been undertrained. A major challenge to the League would be finding a way to grow technical training institutions, while also ensuring that individuals have jobs to come back to once there training is complete. The League should consider creating additional incentives for people to go into vocational roles. This may include governments exploring better ways to exchange information on current workforce needs and ongoing shifts in the market in order to plan what type of training should be supported.<sup>36</sup> There is also a stigma attached to vocational training that needs to be resolved, though many places this change has already begun organically.

## **II. Questions to Consider in Your Research**

- What are the main degrees issued by universities in my country? Are those disciplines above or below market demand?
- What are the areas in my economy that lack properly-trained workforces?
- What cultural or educational structures are of my universities built on? Have they been successful in preparing students for future careers?
- What are the predominant international schools in my state or region, and are they likely to form partnerships under League structure?

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<sup>36</sup> Hoteit, Leila, et al. "Education in the Mena region needs guidance while its young." *The National*, 11 Jan. 2014, [www.thenational.ae/business/education-in-the-mena-region-needs-guidance-while-it-s-young-1.278451](http://www.thenational.ae/business/education-in-the-mena-region-needs-guidance-while-it-s-young-1.278451).

Accessed 31 July 2017.

### III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- How can funding be made more easily available to institutions around the region?
- What are standards the League needs to adopt to ensure international expectations are met?
- How can the League develop vocational training networks that will move trainees to where they are needed, but also while reducing the chances of abuse?
- What will the League do to attract foreign experts and teaching staff, if at all?

### IV. Additional Resources

<https://www.cnbc.com/2015/05/22/middle-east-skills-shortage.html>

*This is a good basic view of the problems MENA markets are facing when it comes to the lack of qualified workers. It is written from a business perspective so it brings in concerns that might not otherwise be discussed.*

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2016/08/16/middle-east-education/#1ace10b42f44>

*This article talks about the cultural change that needs to happen in the MENA. While it is more geared toward the Gulf region, many of the problems are still the same.*

<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/vocational-training>

*The United Nations Relief and Works Agency runs several projects in the Middle East, and they could provide several models on how to better support MENA vocational training.*

[http://www.ooscimena.org/uploads/1/wysiwyg/reports/TVET\\_Consultation\\_Meeting\\_Report\\_Sept2016.pdf](http://www.ooscimena.org/uploads/1/wysiwyg/reports/TVET_Consultation_Meeting_Report_Sept2016.pdf)

*This is a very comprehensive report done on specifically MENA vocational training. It demonstrates pathways for better training as well as consideration that need to be taken into account for creating new programs.*