2025 - 2026
Model Arab League
BACKGROUND GUIDE

Council of Arab Economics Affairs Ministers

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National Council on US-Arab Relations

Original draft by Brooke Rhodes, Chair of the Council of Arab Affairs Ministers at the 2025 National University Model Arab League, with contributions from the dedicated staff and volunteers at the National Council of the U.S.-Arab Relations

Honorable Delegates,

Welcome to the 2025-2026 Model Arab League Council of Arab Economics Affairs Ministers. My name is Brooke Rhodes. I am originally from Wisconsin and am currently a fourth-year student at Northeastern University, majoring in International Affairs and Economics with a minor in Consulting. For the past two years, I have had the privilege of competing in this council and chairing at the Northeast Regional Model Arab League Conference. I am excited to spend my final year working with you as your chair at the National Conference. This committee is shamelessly my favorite, and I hope you find your experience equally as rewarding when exploring this year's topics and working towards solutions that elevate economic growth across the region.

This guide outlines the topics that will be discussed in committee and is intended to serve a starting point for your research. It provides foundational context but leaves room for you to explore further, with your own insights and analysis. The Council of Economic Affairs Ministers is responsible for crafting policies that promote economic cooperation and integration among member states, all while striving toward inclusive and sustainable development. Economic progress should be pursued in a way that balances national interests with broader regional goals. The more prepared you are, the more meaningful, complex and productive debate will be.

Throughout my time in Model Arab League, I have come to deeply value the personal and intellectual growth it fosters. It is a space for students to challenge themselves academically, diplomatically, and interpersonally. My hope is that this experience sparks your curiosity and encourages a lifelong passion for learning, not just about the Arab League, but about the world and its people. There is immense value in adopting a mindset focused on practical solutions and long-term improvement.

As your chair I am here to support you. I am committed to creating an environment that is both inclusive and engaging. Please treat your fellow delegates with respect and kindness; this is a space in which all should feel welcome. If you have any questions as you prepare for the conference, do not hesitate to reach out. You can contact me at rhodes.b@northeastern.edu.

I am eager to see the perspectives and ideas you bring to the table. Best of luck, delegates!

Sincerely,
Brooke Rhodes

Topic I: Developing vocational and technical education programs in primary and secondary schools to enhance workforce readiness and economic diversification

I. Introduction

A. General Background

Primary and secondary education are key components of a country's educational system, typically following early childhood education and preceding tertiary (higher) education. Primary education, generally designed for children between the ages of 6 and 11, works to develop foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy. Secondary education, typically spanning ages 11 to 18, aims to build on this foundation and further prepare students for additional academic pursuits or vocational training, or direct entrance to the workplace.[1] Vocational and Technical Education (VTE), as defined by UNESCO, refers to "education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods", frequently combining classroom learning with practical, work-based experiences. It equips students with both technical competencies and transversal skills such as problem-solving and adaptability.[2] In recent years, greater attention has been placed on how schools can provide students with these practical skills needed to succeed in dynamic labor markets and contribute to national economic diversification.

The value of education is reflected in international development frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 4, "Quality of Education", emphasizes inclusive and equitable access to education while also highlighting the importance of promoting relevant skills for employment and entrepreneurship.[3] Two common metrics used to evaluate education access are the Net Enrollment Rate (NER) and the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER). According to UNESCO, NER is defined as the total number of students of the official age group for a given level of education enrolled in any level, expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population. GER measures the number of students enrolled at a particular level of education, regardless of age, as a percentage of the official age group for that level.[4] The World Bank estimates that the global average primary school NER to be 90%, while the Arab region is behind at only 85%. In secondary education, the Arab region's NER is just 64%, also lagging behind the global average of 66%.[5] Low persistence rates, with nearly one in five students not completing primary education in the region, highlight the urgency of designing pathways,

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[1] "EDUCATION INDICATORS: An International Perspective / Indicator 1 Side Bar." Nces.ed.gov, nces.ed.gov/Pubs/eiip/eiip1s01.asp.

[2] "Recommendation Concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)," Unesco.org, 2015, https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-technical-and-vocational-education-and-training-tvet.

[3] The Global Goals. "Goal 4: Quality Education." The Global Goals, 2025, globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/.

[4] UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Gross Enrolment Ratios – 2017. UNESCO, 2019. PDF file, uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/opri/en/Gross_enrolment_ratios_final.pdf.

[5] Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization. Smart Libraries in the Arab World. ALECSO, 2021. PDF file, www.alecso.org/publications/SLIBNU-ALECSO_BOOK.pdf.

such as vocational and technical topics that keep students engaged and connected to future opportunities.[6]

Challenges remain in developing effective VTE programs. Data limitations in enrollment, achievement and financing make it difficult to assess workforce readiness or to align school curricula with labor market needs. Disaggregated data by location, gender, and socioeconomic status is frequently unavailable, making it harder to ensure equal access to specific programs.[7] Efforts are needed to improve data collection and transparency to best allocate resources and develop more impactful vocational programs. Another barrier is teacher capacity: many schools across the Arab League already struggle with shortages of qualified educators, and specialized training is needed to deliver technical and vocational subjects. It is estimated by the UN that globally 69 million new teachers will be required to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030, this figure underscores the resource intensity of expanding VTE alongside traditional subjects.[8]

Infrastructure and funding also play central roles. Classrooms often lack the equipment, materials, and safe learning environments required for effective technical education. Without investment in laboratories, workshops, and updated curricula, vocational training risks being undervalued compared to academic pathways.[9] In the Arab region, persistent underinvestment in school infrastructure, teacher training, and professional development has hindered progress. Strengthening VTE in primary and secondary schools thus requires coordinated efforts not only to expand access but also to modernize teaching, materials, and facilities so that students can graduate ready to contribute to diversified, innovation-driven economies.

B. History in the Arab World

Despite broad recognition that effective education systems underpin poverty reduction and growth, many systems in the Arab region have historically prioritized academic, exam-oriented pathways while underinvesting in vocational and technical options.[10] This has led to weak learning outcomes and a persistent mismatch between what students learn and the skills employers need. Efforts to measure and improve academic performance through international assessments like the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have revealed that all participating Arab countries perform below the OECD average,

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[6] Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization. Smart Libraries in the Arab World. ALECSO, 2021. PDF file, www.alecso.org/publications/SLIBNU-ALECSO_BOOK.pdf.

[7] "ASDR." Unescwa.org, 2020, asdr-2024.unescwa.org/sdg-04.html#g-4-what-the-data-say. Accessed 27 July 2025.

[8] Hodal, Kate. "UN Warns Universal Education Goal Will Fail Without 69 Million New Teachers." The Guardian, The Guardian, 5 Oct. 2016, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/oct/05/un-universal-education-goal-fail-69-million-new-teachers-unesco.

[9] Rueckert, Phineas. "10 Barriers to Education That Children Living in Poverty Face." Global Citizen, 13 Aug. 2019, www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/10-barriers-to-education-around-the-world-2/.

[10] "What Prevents Arab Students from Pursuing Vocational Education?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2012/05/what-prevents-arab-students-from-pursuing-vocational-education?lang=en.

underscoring the urgency of education reform and improvements, ideally embedding relevant, work-linked competencies in earlier schooling.[11]

Education structures and requirements still vary widely across the League, shaping how and when vocational and technical education (VTE/TVET) can be introduced. The majority of countries mandate six years of primary education, although Algeria, Djibouti, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) require five years, while Palestine and Oman require only four. Lower secondary education typically spans two to six years, with an average duration of three years. While many League countries have laws mandating both primary and secondary education, Comoros, Iraq and the UAE only require primary education, with Somalia having no compulsory education requirements at all.[12] As a result, the window for structured exposure to technical content varies greatly in the League, which could lead to diverse starting ports for common VTE agendas. ISECED mapping tools from UNESCO also show how divergent program durations and sequences are affected when career exploration and pre-vocational modules can be integrated.[13]

Over the last two decades, enrollment and completion have risen, but the region still trails global secondary completion rates, and gender gaps persist. As of 2020, 13.9% of primary school-aged children in the Arab region were out of school, with 15.5% of girls and 12.4% of boys, compared to the global average of 8.8%.[14] Cultural norms, early marriage, safety concerns, and limited access to gender sensitive infrastructure contribute to this gap.[15] Additionally, pathways seen as traditionally "male", such as industrial or engineering tracks, remain less accessible to girls due to factors such as societal expectations, discrimination, and lack of supportive work environments.[16] Global evidence synthesized by the World Bank affirms that well-structured skills systems raise employability and productivity when programs are competency-based, demand-driven, and connected to employers.[17]

Several Arab countries have launched notable reforms to bring VTE nearer to the mainstream of secondary education. Egypt's "Technical Education 2.0" (2018-2024) is

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[11] Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization. Smart Libraries in the Arab World. ALECSO, 2021. PDF file, www.alecso.org/publications/SLIBNU-ALECSO_BOOK.pdf.
[12] Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization. Smart Libraries in the Arab World. ALECSO, 2021. PDF file, www.alecso.org/publications/SLIBNU-ALECSO_BOOK.pdf.
[13] "Using ISCED Diagrams to Compare Education Systems," 2021, https://isced.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2021/05/UIS-ISCED-DiagramsCompare-web.pdf.
[14] "ASDR." Unescwa.org, 2020, asdr-2024.unescwa.org/sdg-04.html#g-4-what-the-data-say.
[15] Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi and Valentine Moghadam, "Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa," PRB, November 20, 2003, https://www.prb.org/resources/empowering-women-developing-society-female-education-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/.
[16] Dalal Najib et al., "THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES PRESS," accessed April 14, 2025, https://doi.org/10.17226/25820.
[17] "Building Better Formal TVET Systems: Principles and Practice in Low- and Middle-Income Countries," World Bank, July 13, 2023, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/skillsdevelopment/publication/better-technical-vocational-education-training-TVET.

transitioning thousands of technical secondary programs to competency-based curricula, upgrading teacher training and expanding "Applied Technology Schools" that co-design curricula with industry.[18] UNESCO-UNEVOC estimates that Egypt's Ministry of Education and Technical Education (MoETE) oversees approximately 3,000 technical secondary schools serving approximately 2.3 million students; EU and ETF assessments report substantial progress on curriculum relevance and employer partnerships, with commercial tracks attracting high female participation.[19] In the Gulf, the UAE's Applied Technology High Schools and national TVET framework allow students to switch into technical secondary programs from the intermediate/Cycle 2 stage and graduate with a Technical Secondary diploma, which demonstrates how VTE can be embedded within general education while preserving academic progression.[20] Saudi Arabia's Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) has scaled offerings to hundreds of thousands of learners across technical colleges and training centers, expanding specializations aligned to diversification priorities under Vision 2030.[21] North African systems provide additional models. Morocco's Office for Vocational Training and Employment Promotion, financed through a mix of state grants, its own resources, and a training levy, expanded capacity dramatically over the 2000s by opening new institutions and raising annual training slots, illustrating how stable, earmarked finance can sustain TVET growth.[22]

At the same time, persistent system constraints complicate VTE expansion. Data on enrollment, completion, financing, and labor-market outcomes remain patchy or outdated, making it harder to target investments and evaluate impact. Recent UN and regional diagnostics emphasize the need for disaggregated, comparable indicators to guide policy, especially as ministries pilot new technical streams, school-industry partnerships, and work-based learning.[23] Jordan's 2023 TVET Strategy and UNESCO's system review

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[18] "Vocational and Technical Education Guiding Career Development in Egypt | ETF," www.etf.europa.eu, November 15, 2022, https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/news/vocational-and-technical-education-guiding-career-development-egypt.

[19] Dilip Parajuli et al., "Improving the Performance of Higher Education in Vietnam Improving the Performance of Higher Education in Vietnam Strategic Priorities and Policy Options," October 15, 2020, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/347431588175259657/pdf/Improving-the-Performance-of-Higher-Education-in-Vietnam-Strategic-Priorities-and-Policy-Options.pdf.

[20] "Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) - the Official Portal of the UAE Government," u.ae, n.d., https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/education/technical-and-vocational-education.

[21] "Technical and Vocational Training Corporation," Saudipedia (SaudiPedia, May 29, 2024), https://saudipedia.com/en/article/358/government-and-politics/institutions/technical-and-vocational-training-corporation.

[22] "MOROCCO Skills Development for Employment the Role of Technical and Vocational Education and Training," 2020, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/919151593565793405/pdf/Morocco-Skills-Development-for-Employment-The-Role-of-Technical-and-Vocational-Education-and-Training.pdf.

[23] "The Contribution of Development Indices in Closing the Gender Gap and Advancing Social and Economic Development," 2024, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/education-arab-region-closing-gaps-no-child-left-behind-english.pdf.

exemplify the push toward coordinated governance, quality assurance, and relevance to active labor-market demand.[24]

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted educational systems across the Arab world, magnifying these challenges. Between 2020 and 2022, schools were fully closed for an average of 25.2 weeks and partially closed for an additional 45.4 weeks. This resulted in a loss of 0.5 to 1.1 learning-adjusted years of school per student.[25] Without a robust recovery, the region is at risk of losing up to $800 billion in future income as a result of learning losses and increased dropout rates. Access to learning was greatly impacted by the differing rates of face-to-face learning, hybrid learning, and full remote learning. Evidence shows that 40% of students within the MENA region (40% of children) did not benefit from any remote learning initiative and the majority were already vulnerable and disadvantaged. Without robust recovery plans, multiple analyses warn of enduring learning loss and future earnings declines, amplifying the need for a "learn-by-doing" pathway in upper-primary and secondary grades.[26]

C. Finding a Solution to the Problem: Past, Present, and Future

To strengthen workforce readiness and support economic diversification across the Arab League, countries must consider advancing reforms that embed VTE more deeply within primary and secondary systems. Traditional academic pathways remain dominant, yet they are often falling short of equipping students with the applied skills required by rapidly evolving economies. Many Arab states are recognizing that modern VTE programs, aligned to labor market demand and accessible to all learners, are critical for national economic resilience.

One key area for reform is the content and structure of national curricula. Traditionally, secondary schooling in the Arab world has emphasized rote memorization and university preparation, leaving little space for practical training. As industries shift toward technology, services, and knowledge-based economies, there is growing pressure to introduce curricula that prioritize critical thinking, digital literacy, problem-solving, and applied technical skills.[27] Countries such as Egypt and UAE have piloted competency-based models, but scaling such innovations requires ensuring that VTE pathways are not perceived as "second-class" tracks. Efforts to mainstream technical modules, such as coding, entrepreneurship, and pre-apprenticeship experiences, at early stages of schooling, could keep students engaged in future career options.

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[24] "Jordan Technical and Vocational Education and Training System Review 2023," Unesco.org, 2023, https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/jordan-technical-and-vocational-education-and-training-system-review-2023.
[25] "Country Dashboard – Covid-19 Response." UNESCO Institue for Statistics , covid19.uis.unesco.org/global-monitoring-school-closures-covid19/country-dashboard/.
[26] UNICEF. Executive Summary: MENA Generation 2030. UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, 2019, https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/14501/file/Executive%20Summary%20.pdf.
[27] "Engaging Society to Reform Arab Education: From Schooling to Learning." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2018/10/engaging-society-to-reform-arab-education-from-schooling-to-learning?lang=en. Accessed 27 July 2025.

Equity of access is another pressing concern as questions remain on whether current education serves all students, especially girls, children with disabilities and youth from rural or conflict-affected regions.[28] Even as enrollment trends improve, physical, cultural, and institutional barriers may continue to prevent many from fully participating in school life. Inclusive strategies will need to address cultural norms, gender-sensitive infrastructure and awareness campaigns that highlight opportunities in diverse technical fields. Strengthening career counseling and community engagement can also ensure families view VTE as a respected pathway, not a fallback.

Government allocation of educational resources also deserves renewed focus. Several Arab League states may benefit from benchmarking their education spending, both in terms of total expenditure and distribution across regions and school levels, especially against global and regional peers. This attention may be needed to examine whether spending patterns adequately support underserved areas or disproportionately favor urban and elite institutions. Investing in early education systems and basic infrastructure in neglected areas may yield long-term dividends, both educationally and economically.

Improving the region's data infrastructure is also valuable. Current enrollment and completion data often fail to capture the quality or labor-market relevance of vocational programs. Without robust tracking of student outcomes, policymakers cannot assess whether VTE is truly preparing youth for employment or entrepreneurship. Investments in education dashboards and labor-market forecasting tools could help identify skill gaps and target reforms more easily.[29]

Finally, technology integration and reliance planning will be crucial for the future of VTE. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of hands-on learning when schools were closed; many students lacked access to remote or simulated training tools. Looking ahead, hybrid models that combine classroom learning with digital simulations, e-labs, or partnerships could make VTE more resilient and adaptive. At the same time, catch-up and remedial programs are ended to help students recover from lost instructional time, ensuring that technical education pathways remain accessible despite disruptions.[30] While few countries have piloted summer programs and accelerated learning tracks, further experimentation and cross-country comparison could be valuable for identifying strategies to prevent long-term setbacks in student learning and reducing the dropout risk. The path forward requires Arab states to develop national skills strategies rooted in innovation, inclusivity, and employer engagement. By expanding high-quality VTE within primary and secondary systems, member states can better prepare young people for the labor force while driving long-term economic diversification across the region.

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[28] Jenkins, Robert. "Education in Crisis: How Crises around the World Are Impacting Children's Learning." Unicef.org, 2024, www.unicef.org/blog/education-crisis-how-crises-around-world-are-impacting-childrens-learning.
[29] Gustafsson-Wright, Emily, et al. "Digital Tools for Real-Time Data Collection in Education." Brookings, Nov. 2022, www.brookings.edu/articles/digital-tools-for-real-time-data-collection-in-education/.
[30] Zaalouk, Malak. Teacher Professional Development in the Arab States during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Trends and Recommendations. UNESCO – International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2021. PDF file, teachertaskforce.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/2021_Zaalouk_UNESCO_TPD-Arab-States-during-COVID-19-pandemic_EN.pdf.

II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- How early is too early to put children on defined career or educational tracks?
- How can governments balance general education (critical thinking, literacy, numeracy) with early specialization?
- What mechanisms are in place to monitor school performance, enrollment, and dropout rates? Are these data systems reliable and disaggregated?
- Does developing vocational programs represent necessary workforce planning, or does it risk government overstepping by shaping citizens' futures too rigidly?
- What political, cultural, or financial challenges does your country face in pursuing nationwide education reform?

III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- How can Arab League countries cooperate to reduce disparities in access and quality of education?
- Should the Arab League develop a regional framework or guidelines for equitable education standards, including minimum years of schooling?
- What role should technology play in expanding educational access, and how can the digital divide be reduced equitably?
- How can countries be supported in building or upgrading infrastructure related to education, such as in classrooms or for transportation?

IV. Additional Resources

Education in the Arab World: A Legacy of Coming Up Short

This Wilson Center article explores the historical and political challenges that have slowed educational progress in the Arab world.

Arab League Education Programs: Investing in Arab Knowledge

This article from FasterCapital highlights various initiatives by the Arab League to improve education, with a lens on regional development and innovation.

Three Priorities for Protecting Education in Conflict Zones

This Chatham House piece outlines strategic priorities for safeguarding education in regions affected by armed conflict, particularly in the Arab world.

Trained Teachers in Primary Education - Country Rankings

This data set from TheGlobalEconomy ranks MENA countries by the percentage of trained primary school teachers, offering insight into regional education capacity.

Topic II: Exploring blue economy sectors to create a framework integrating investment, research, and environmental sustainability

I. Introduction

A. General Background

The concept of the "blue economy" has gained increased global attention as nations seek pathways to sustainable development that balance economic growth with ocean and water resource conservation. The blue economy broadly refers to the sustainable use of ocean and aquatic resources for economic activity, improved livelihoods, and jobs while maintaining the health of marine and freshwater ecosystems. It encompasses sectors such as fisheries, aquaculture, coastal tourism, maritime transport, offshore renewable energy, and emerging fields like biotechnology and seabed resource exploration. The blue economy requires integrating environmental stewardship, social equity, and innovation to ensure long-term viability.[31]

Globally, the blue economy is already a powerful driver of growth. The OECD projects that ocean-based insecticides could contribute $3 trillion annually to the global economy by 2030 if managed sustainably.[32] In the Arab world, which is bordered by major seas and oceans including the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, there is great potential for blue economy investment.[33] Fisheries and aquaculture provide crucial food security, coastal and marine tourism are central to the national income in countries like Egypt, Morocco, creating job opportunities and generating income for many.[34] At the same time, the region faces significant sustainability challenges such as overfishing, marine pollution, coastal degradation, and the vulnerabilities posed by climate change, all threatening to undermine the long-term potential of these sectors.[35]

Although there is much to be gained from the blue economy, it is primarily wealthier nations that thrive due to their established ports, shipbuilding industries, and advanced tourism infrastructure, making them better positioned to capitalize on ocean-based growth. In contrast, smaller or conflict-affected states may struggle to invest in research, marine science, or clean energy projects. This imbalance mirrors global trends: small island and coastal developing states often depend heavily on marine resources but lack

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[31] "Sustainable Blue Economy Vital for Small Countries and Coastal Populations," United Nations, n.d., https://www.un.org/en/desa/sustainable-blue-economy-vital-small-countries-and-coastal-populations.
[32] The Commonwealth, "Sustainable Blue Economy," Commonwealth, 2024, https://thecommonwealth.org/bluecharter/sustainable-blue-economy.
[33] "Blue Skies, Blue Seas: Air Pollution, Marine Plastics, and Coastal Erosion in the Middle East and North Africa," World Bank, n.d., https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/publication/blue-skies-blue-seas-air-pollution-marine-plastics-and-coastal-erosion-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa.
[34] "Blue Food and Blue Jobs Are Transforming Livelihoods," World Bank (World Bank Group, December 2, 2024), https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2024/11/14/blue-food-and-blue-jobs-are-transforming-livelihoods.
[35] Opeyemi Quadri, "Challenges of Blue Economy, Benefits, and Its Components - INFOMEDIANG," INFOMEDIANG, August 21, 2023, https://infomediang.com/blue-economy/.

sufficient capital or governance frameworks to manage them sustainably.[36] This highlights the need to pursue cooperative frameworks that ensure investment is not only economically viable but also environmentally responsible and socially inclusive. For example, Seychelles became the first country to issue a sovereign blue bond in 2018, raising US $15 million to fund marine protected areas, sustainable fisheries, and climate-resilient coastal communities.[37]

As the blue economy becomes more integrated into national development strategies, policy and governance considerations must take center stage. Governments face the challenge of balancing profit-driven growth with ecological limits. For example, unchecked expansion of fisheries or tourism can degrade marine biodiversity, while unregulated seabed mining poses risks to fragile ecosystems. International institutions such as the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) stress that blue economy development must align with sustainability principles, including the SDGs, particularly Goal 14: "Life Below Water".[38] Building a successful framework for the blue economy will require integrating investment, research, and sustainability.

B. History in the Arab World

The Arab region's relationship with the sea has long been central to its cultural identity, trade, and economic development. Historically, Arab seafaring communities engaged in extensive maritime trade networks stretching across the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Mediterranean.[39] Coastal cities like Alexandira, Aden, and Muscat flourished as hubs of commerce, while traditional fishing and pearl diving supported livelihoods in the gulf states for centuries.[40] The discovery of oil in the 20th century shifted the region's economic priorities toward hydrocarbons, yet maritime resources remained vital, particularly through shipping routes like the Suez Canal and Strait of Hormuz, which remain some of the most strategically important waterways in the world.[41]

In recent decades, Arab governments have increasingly recognized the importance of the blue economy as part of efforts to diversify beyond oil. For example, countries along the Red Sea and Mediterranean coasts, such as Egypt and Morocco, have invested heavily in

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[36] "Sustainable Blue Economy," UNEP - UN Environment Programme, December 13, 2023, https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/ecosystem-based-approaches/sustainable-blue-economy.
[37] "Small Islands Are Innovators for the Ocean," Global Environment Facility, May 29, 2024, https://www.thegef.org/newsroom/feature-stories/small-islands-are-innovators-ocean.
[38] "Sustainable Blue Economy," UNEP - UN Environment Programme, December 13, 2023, https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/ecosystem-based-approaches/sustainable-blue-economy.
[39] Marwan Ghazi Shuaib, "The Manuscript of Shaykh ʿAbd Al-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad Al-Ḥifẓī as a Source for the History of Asir in the 13th Hijri Century: An Analytical Study," *Darah Journal of Arabian Peninsula Studies* 2, no. 1 (June 21, 2024): 120–49, https://doi.org/10.1163/29501768-20240104.
[40] "Alexandria-Jewel of the Mediterranean and Its Economic Renaissance | The Enterprise World," The Enterprise World, May 26, 2025, https://theenterpriseworld.com/alexandria-jewel-of-the-mediterranean/.
[41] New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "The Importance of the Suez Canal to Global Trade - 18 April 2021," New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, April 18, 2021, https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/mfat-market-reports/the-importance-of-the-suez-canal-to-global-trade-18-april-2021.

tourism infrastructure, with coastal tourism accounting for a significant share of GDP and employment.[42] The World Bank notes that tourism, fisheries, and maritime transport are among the largest contributors to the blue economy in the region.[43] Meanwhile, Gulf states such as the UAE[44] and Oman[45] are building new ports, expanding aquaculture capacity, and experimenting with offshore renewable energy projects to align with broader economic diversification strategies like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.[46]

Despite these advances, Arab nations face considerable challenges in developing their blue sectors sustainably. Coastal ecosystems across the Mediterranean and Red sea are under threat from plastic pollution and coastal hazards. The Mediterranean, a semi-enclosed and highly populated sea, has become a hotspot for plastic contamination. Studies estimate that plastics account for 80% of marine litter,[47] with 229,000 tonnes entering its waters annually.[48] This mismanaged waste, especially from land-based sources such as tourism, inadequate waste systems, and rivers, poses direct threats to marine diversity and coastal economies. Climate change also exacerbates risk by identifying sea level rise, coral reef degradation, and coastal flooding, with Gulf and Nile Delta populations particularly vulnerable.[49]

A further structural challenge is the dominance of state-led, top-down approaches to blue economy governance. Many countries continue to centralize maritime policy in national-level administrations, leaving local authorities with limited power or funding, particularly for marine monitoring, technology adaptation and staff training. This centralized structure often prioritizes large-scale infrastructure and foreign investment

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[42] "TRANSITIONING towards SUSTAINABLE and CLIMATE- SMART TOURISM in the MIDDLE EAST and NORTH AFRICA (MENA) Recommendations for the Tourism Sectors in Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco," 2024, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099061424112040218/pdf/P179025-c8bbf9fe-c05b-4377-b95c-b1d97df28915.pdf.

[43] The World Bank, "Oceans, Fisheries and Coastal Economies," World Bank, September 15, 2023, https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/oceans-fisheries-and-coastal-economies.

[44] Nafisa Eltahir, "EXCLUSIVE UAE to Build Red Sea Port in Sudan in $6 Billion Investment Package," *Reuters*, June 21, 2022, sec. Middle East, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-uae-build-red-sea-port-sudan-6-billion-investment-package-2022-06-20/.

[45] "Oman's Ports in 2025: Expansion, Green Growth, and Rising Cargo Volumes - the Business Year," The Business Year - Interviews & news from around the world, August 5, 2025, https://thebusinessyear.com/article/ports-oman-2025/?srsltid=AfmBOoqILxucrOjAhlsKp5mXlxD1pD9lJGI7BU0vHAXHaYhTgZQmZPvV.

[46] GBO Correspondent, "Saudi Vision 2030: Meet Kingdom's USD 3.2 Trillion 'Blue Economy' Plan," Global Business Outlook - Covering the globe's vital informations (Global Business Outlook, August 12, 2024), https://globalbusinessoutlook.com/economy/saudi-vision-meet-kingdoms-usd-trillion-blue-economy-plan/.

[47] "From Source to Sea — the Untold Story of Marine Litter," Europa.eu, January 19, 2023, https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/from-source-to-sea-the-untold-story-of-marine-litter.

[48] Over, "Over 200,000 Tonnes of Plastic Leaking into the Mediterranean Each Year – IUCN Report," IUCN, October 27, 2020, https://iucn.org/news/marine-and-polar/202010/over-200000-tonnes-plastic-leaking-mediterranean-each-year-iucn-report.

[49] Abderraouf Hzami et al., "Alarming Coastal Vulnerability of the Deltaic and Sandy Beaches of North Africa," Scientific Reports 11, no. 1 (January 27, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-77926-x.

over community-based participation or local capacity building.[50] However, there are growing signs of grassroots and research-driven innovation across the region. In Morocco and Tunisia, local cooperatives and public-private partnerships are promoting sustainable fishing practices and combating pollution through reparatory models.[51] Egypt has seen youth-led marine plastic recycling initiatives grow in scope, often aligned with the "Plastic-Free Coastlines" strategy. Across the Gulf, academic institutions like the Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi's Institute for Oceans are spearheading marine science, aquaculture research and coral restoration projects.[52]

If harnessed correctly, the Arab region's blue economy has the potential not only to strengthen food security and diversify income sources but also promote workforce inclusion and environmental resilience.[53] This will require balancing large-scale investment with local empowerment, and integrating traditional knowledge with modern science to ensure that growth does not come at the expense of long-term stability.

C. Finding a Solution to the Problem: Past, Present, and Future

Historically, Arab League nations have turned to large-scale state investment and infrastructure development as central tools for modernization and economic diversification. The same pattern is now evident in the blue economy, where governments have launched ambitious port expansions, fisheries projects, and tourism infrastructure initiatives.[54] While these efforts demonstrate the potential of state-led development, they have often prioritized rapid economic growth over environmental sustainability. Lessons from past modernization efforts, such as those in oil and gas, highlight the importance of balancing economic efficiency with long-term ecological and social equity in building resilient blue economy sectors.[55]

Currently, several Arab League nations are beginning to design integrated strategies that connect investment, research, and environmental protection within the blue economy. The UAE has developed the National Blue Economy Framework, emphasizing marine biodiversity alongside tourism and renewable energy,[56] while Oman has outlined a Blue

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[50] "Contribution of Local and Regional Authorities to the Development of the Blue Economy in the Mediterranean," Iemed.org, 2019, https://www.iemed.org/publication/contribution-of-local-and-regional-authorities-to-the-development-of-the-blue-economy-in-the-mediterranean/.
[51] "Overview," World Bank, n.d., https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/mena-blue-program/overview.
[52] "MENA Countries Must Chart the Future of Region's Blue Economy," Arab News, September 7, 2024, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2570475.
[53] "Overview," World Bank, n.d., https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/mena-blue-program/overview.
[54] "Arab Sustainable Development Report," 2024, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/arab-sustainable-development-report-2024-english.pdf.
[55] "The Power of Green Building in the Arab World," ArcGIS StoryMaps (Esri, December 12, 2024), https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/32a60e29c3a4433e8dc8840710a4b61f.
[56] "Sustainable Blue Economy | Emirates Nature-WWF," Emiratesnaturewwf.ae, 2022, https://www.emiratesnaturewwf.ae/en/page/sustainable-blue-economy.

Economy Strategy 2040 linking sustainable fisheries, aquaculture, and ocean research.[57] These approaches show how targeted policy frameworks are capable of aligning economic growth, scientific innovation and ecological sustainability. However, progress remains uneven across the region as wealthier states dominate with resources and infrastructure, while many lower-income nations are without the fiscal capacity to fund marine research or attract sustainable development. There are also questions regarding how successfully nations will be able to transition when there is a strong dependency on oil revenues and difficulties effectively diversifying economies.[58]

For states with financial limitations, the barriers are especially structural. There are underdeveloped ports, weak research institutions and ineffective regulatory frameworks with low environmental monitoring capacities. These states remain heavily dependent on subsistence fishing and informal maritime activities, leaving them vulnerable to problems such as overshifting, climate change and pollution.[59] Without foundational investments in ocean science, digital data systems and education, their ability to participate in regional blue economy growth will remain constrained. Regional inequality risks deepening if Gulf states capture most of the investment and innovation, excluding nations with fewer resources.[60]

The Arab League has the ability to play a central role in fostering a shared framework that can integrate investment and research while focusing on environmental sustainability.[61] This could include open access regional martine data systems, opening up collaboration opportunities between universities, and supporting private-sector and grassroots participation. By embedding environmental safeguards, labor protections, and inclusivity into future policies, the blue economy can serve as an engine of innovation and a tool of equity.

II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- What safeguards are needed to ensure that investment does not worsen overfishing, pollution, or ecosystem degradation?
- What role should regional research centers and universities play in supporting innovation in the blue economy?
- What policies are necessary to expand Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) while balancing the needs of local economies?
- How can smaller or conflict-affected states access financing and technology to participate in the blue economy?

III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

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[57] "Oman Vision 2040: A Blueprint for Sustainable Growth and Global Integration," World Bank Blogs, 2025, https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/arabvoices/oman-vision-2040-a-blueprint-for-sustainable-growth-and-global-integration.

[58] Mohammad E A Alqattan, "The Kuwaiti Blue Economy and Its Potential Obstacles," Heliyon 10, no. 10 (May 1, 2024): e30975–75, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e30975.

[59] "Overview," World Bank, n.d., https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/mena-blue-program/overview.

[60] Johannes Grow, "Economic (In)Security and Economic Integration in the Middle East," E-International Relations, 2013, https://www.e-ir.info/2019/05/15/economic-insecurity-and-economic-integration-in-the-middle-east/.

[61] "MENA Oceans Initiative," Goumbook, February 10, 2025, https://goumbook.com/mena-oceans-initiative/.

- How can Arab League members ensure that AI and automation contribute to economic development without deepening inequality?
- How can member states support each other in developing digital infrastructure in underserved regions?
- How can AI be integrated into traditional industries in ways that create new jobs rather than eliminate them?
- What long-term monitoring mechanisms can ensure that AI implementation across the region remains inclusive and sustainable?

IV. Additional Resources

The Role of Blue Finance in Facilitating a Sustainable Blue Economy

This Transition Investment article examines how innovative financial instruments like blue bonds, blended finance, and public-private partnerships are mobilizing capital to support ocean-based development.

The Blue Economy: Empowering Middle Eastern and African Economies for Sustainable Growth

This Leaders International piece highlights opportunities and challenges of blue economy sectors in MENA and African regions.

Challenges of the Blue Economy: Evidence and Research Trends

This Environmental Sciences Europe article discusses the governance gaps and policy challenges surrounding ocean pollution.

Knowledge, Power and the Blue Economy: Breaking Down Barriers

This ScienceDirect study analyzes real-world case studies showing how financial innovations can be leveraged to fund marine protection and sustainable development.

Topic III: Facilitating regional integration through cross-border infrastructure projects across the Arab League

I. Introduction

A. General Background

Cross-border infrastructure plays a foundational role in connecting people, goods, and ideas across international boundaries, providing countries with a path toward shared economic growth, resilience and inclusive development. Investing in sustainable infrastructure such as renewable energy, green transport, and digital systems, not only reduces environmental impact but also enables regional cooperation and integration.[62] Yet, in many parts of the developing world, infrastructure remains inadequate, unreliable and fragmented.[63] Addressing these infrastructure gaps is critical for unlocking long-term stability and economic potential cross regions.

Regional integration occurs when countries work together to reduce or eliminate barriers to trade, harmonize regulatory and fiscal policies and collaborate on public investments and institutions. Countries are able to overcome divisions created by geography, poor infrastructure and inefficient policies. Through the fostering of economic coordination, integration supports economic development goals by boosting trade, attracting cross-border investment, enhancing connectivity and improving regional competitiveness.[64] Successful regional integration can be achieved through both physical infrastructure, such as cross-border transportation, information and communications technology (ICT), and energy systems, and institutional infrastructure, which includes coordinated policies and regulatory alignment.[65] Effective cooperation considers the needs of all participating countries, accounting for those with limited financial capacity or digital presences.

Global examples that illustrate the transformative potential of cross-border infrastructure include China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which has mobilized over $1 trillion USD in loans and investments for roads, railways, ports, power grids and pipelines across Asia, Africa, and Europe, greatly expanding trade corridors and logistical integration.[66] Rail Baltica, A European Union-backed greenfield railway corridor is designed to integrate Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into the European high-speed rail network.[67] With an

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[62] "Connectivity across Borders: Global Practices for Cross-Border Infrastructure Projects." Www.gihub.org, www.gihub.org/connectivity-across-borders/.
[63] World Bank. "Overview." World Bank, 29 Sept. 2023, www.worldbank.org/en/topic/infrastructure/overview.
[64] Kenton, Will. "Economic Integration." Investopedia, 18 Apr. 2024, www.investopedia.com/terms/e/economic-integration.asp.
[65] The World Bank. "Regional Integration Overview." World Bank, 2019, www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/overview.
[66] Wang, Christoph . "China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023 – Green Finance & Development Center." Green Finance & Development Center, 5 Feb. 2024, greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2023/.
[67] "New Estimate Says Rail Baltica Will Cost 15.3 Billion Euros." Eng.lsm.lv, LSM, 2025, eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/transport/10.06.2024-new-estimate-says-rail-baltica-will-cost-153-billion-euros.a557482/. Accessed 27 July 2025.

expected 16.2 billion euro in socio-economic gains, the project proves how infrastructure can foster economic coercion and regional stability.[68]

While regional integration offers substantial advantages, there are also accompanying risks and challenges. Countries may have diverging priorities or conflicting interests, especially when considering sovereignty, economic geography or regulatory alignment. Without strong institutions and inclusive policy frameworks, integration can create unevent benefits. Common risks include trade diversion, where trade is rerouted through less efficient member states due to preferential agreements; erosion of national sovereignty; and employment disruptions as workers respond to wage and regulatory differences.[69] Assessing the impacts and risks can be complex, especially in contexts with limited data or institutional capacity. These challenges highlight the importance of designing integration efforts that are inclusive, transport and resultant.

B. History in the Arab World

While the Arab League has long embraced the ideal of regional cooperation, the history of cross-border infrastructure in the region has varied in success. Infrastructure development has been shaped by geography, political divides, resource disparities and intermittent regional coordination. A groundwork for deeper integration has been laid.

Electricity cooperation in the Arab world can be traced back to the Magreb power pool (COMELEC) which initially linked the electricity grids of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco in the early 1950s.[70] Later, Libya was connected and by the late 2000s a 400 kV high-voltage network had emerged across western Arab states.[71] Morocco and Spain constructed two submarine interconnectors, linking their nations and further enabling the Arab-European energy trade, particularly as Morocco expanded renewable energy exports.[72]

In the Eastern Arab world, the Eight Country Interconnection Project (EIJLLPST) between the nations of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria and Turkey was initiated in 1988. This network enabled the first major Arab cross-border electricity exchange, including an Egypt-Jordan link in 1999. It persisted through times of instability, including the Iraq War and Syrian conflict and remains technically functional

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[68] "Rail Baltica." Sior.com, 2025, sior.com/education-and-insights/insights/magazine/sior-report-article/spring-2020/rail-baltica. Accessed 27 July 2025.
[69] Lee, Sarah. "Regional Integration: A Catalyst for Development." Numberanalytics.com, 2025, www.numberanalytics.com/blog/regional-integration-guide#google_vignette. Accessed 27 July 2025.
[70] "North African Power Pool | MMEIPA." Africa-Eu-Energy-Partnership.org, 2021, mmeipa.africa-eu-energy-partnership.org/north-african-power-pool. Accessed 27 July 2025.
[71] Khaled Mabrouk Alkar. "Assessment of Power Plants in the Western Region of Libya during a Period of Insecurity." IntechOpen EBooks, 16 July 2021, https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.97208. Accessed 25 Mar. 2025.
[72] "A Bridge between Two Continents - May 1, 2007 - Ramon Granadino - Transmission & Distribution World - Transmission - Technical Articles - Index - Library - GENI - Global Energy Network Institute." Geni.org, 2016, www.geni.org/globalenergy/library/technical-articles/transmission/transmission-and-distribution-world/a-bridge-between-two-continents/index.shtml. Accessed 27 July 2025.

today.[73] Another key example is the GCC Interconnection Grid, which is a power-sharing system among Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman. The Gulf Electricity Interconnection Project officially began operations in 2009 and since has generated around USD 3.6 billion in cumulative savings.[74] Nations are looking to potentially expand on this project, incorporating additional nations and further reinforcing trans-regional ties.

The Agreement on International Roads in the Arab Mashreq, adopted in May 2001 under UNESCWA, laid the foundation for a trans-Mashreq road system spanning most Arab member states, designed to facilitate trade and human mobility across borders. The network also overlaps with global systems, including linkages with Africa, Asia and Europe.[75] Despite the promise of the project, implementation has varied widely. Political instability and border restrictions are posting barriers to project completion. Countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen have faced infrastructure degradation due to conflict, bringing to light the uncertainty surrounding continuity and security along the routes.[76]

In 2017, sixteen Arab countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding, which established the Pan-Arab Electricity Market (PAEM). Supported by the Arab Ministerial Council for Electricity and the League of Arab states, PAEM is intended to create a unified Arab power market that has the possibility to enable efficient power trade, lower electric costs and improve energy security across the region.[77] This initiative is a part of a broader recognition that regional infrastructure development is critical for long-term economic diversification.

C. Finding a Solution to the Problem: Past, Present, and Future

Creating regional integration through cross-border infrastructure has been a long-standing goal of the Arab League, yet, success has been limited due to uneven and unreliable implementation. While political will exists on paper, a lack of harmonized legal frameworks, disparities in financial capacity, and divergent national agendas have stalled progress. Geopolitical tensions and fragile intergovernmental trust have also strained collective action across borders. By understanding the shortcomings of past initiatives

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[73] "Arab Regional Projects - Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development." Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 15 Oct. 2024, www.arabfund.org/overview/arab-regional-projects/.
[74] "Towards an Adaptable and Resilient GCC Grid - the Energy Year." The Energy Year, 30 Apr. 2025, theenergyyear.com/articles/towards-an-adaptable-and-resilient-gcc-grid/. Accessed 27 July 2025.
[75] "The Development of the Integrated Transport System in the Arab Mashreq." Iemed.org, 2025, www.iemed.org/publication/the-development-of-the-integrated-transport-system-in-the-arab-mashreq/. Accessed 27 July 2025.
[76] "The Environmental Costs of the Escalating Middle East Crisis - CEOBS." CEOBS, 3 Oct. 2024, ceobs.org/the-environmental-costs-of-the-escalating-middle-east-crisis/.
[77] "Bridging Borders with Energy: MENA's Path to Regional Energy Integration." World Bank, World Bank Group, 10 Dec. 2024, www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2024/12/10/bridging-borders-with-energy-mena-s-path-to-regional-energy-integration.

and the modern landscape, there are many future opportunities for growth rooted in reality.[78]

Traditionally, the Arab world has vocalized a desire for unity and economic integration, but translating these ideas into reality have proven challenging. Earlier projects, such as the Maghreb Electricity Interconnection or the Arab Mashreq International Road Network were driven by regional organizations and international development actors and were without sustainable funding and institutional coordination. Additionally, these projects were responses to crisis or donor initiatives, as opposed to intentional regional planning. The short-term nature often meant that once donor funding ran out, maintenance and long-term oversight fell through. This underscores the importance of government frameworks over externally driven agendas.[79]

Today, infrastructure development in the Arab League is shaped by a combination of renewed regional interest and the rising public-private partnerships (PPPs), as well as the goals of economic diversification and resilience.[80] The success of the GCC power grid and Egypt-Saudi Arabia electricity link demonstrate these projects can be successful.

However, political instability in states with more fragile governments such as Syria, Yemen, and Sudan can undermine long-term infrastructure investments. Digital infrastructure disparities also have the possibility to widen gaps rather than bridge them; different national priorities pose challenges.[81] Many conflict-affected or economically weaker states are without the needed institutional capacity and financial resources to parktake in regional projects on equal footing. Addressing these imbalances requires mechanisms for inclusive decision-making and equitable financing structures that can support all member states. It is critical to consider existing dynamics and how to align national and regional objectives while balancing short-term feasibility with long-term transformation so that vulnerable countries and communities are not left behind.

Infrastructure must remain inclusive, climate resilient and digitally integrated. It is important to consider the different goals for cross-border infrastructure such as supporting economic diversification, and promoting regional trade while fostering social cohesion.[82] Investing in a variety of digital corridors could prove impactful. These corridors, ranging from fiber-optic networks to smart logistical hubs, can lower trade

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[78] "Arab Integration: Barriers and Workarounds." Valdai Club, 2025, valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/arab-integration-barriers-and-workarounds/. Accessed 27 July 2025.
[79] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). Assessing Arab Economic Integration: Towards the Arab Customs Union. UN, January 2015. PDF file, unescwa.org/publications/assessing-arab-economic-integration-towards-arab-customs-union
[80] "A Regional Connectivity Partnership for the Mediterranean." Global-Solutions-Initiative.org, 2021, www.global-solutions-initiative.org/publication/a-regional-connectivity-partnership-for-the-mediterranean/. Accessed 27 July 2025.
[81] Rother, Björn, et al. "The Economic Impact of Conflicts and the Refugee Crisis in the Middle East and North Africa." Staff Discussion Notes, vol. 2016, no. 008, 16 Sept. 2016, www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/006/2016/008/article-A001-en.xml, https://doi.org/10.5089/9781475535785.006.A001.
[82] OECD. "Infrastructure for a Climate-Resilient Future." OECD, 2024, www.oecd.org/en/publications/infrastructure-for-a-climate-resilient-future_a74a45b0-en.html.

costs and empower innovation ecosystems across borders. As regional security dynamics continue to evolve, the geopolitical significance of cross-border infrastructure cannot be ignored. Infrastructure has the ability to foster regional interdependence but can also be a source of leverage or an exclusionary force.

II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

- What political, economic, or security barriers does your country face when participating in regional integration efforts?
- Has your country been involved in any trilateral or multilateral agreements to enhance infrastructure or trade integration?
- What digital infrastructure gaps exist in your country, and how do they affect regional connectivity?
- How has your country benefited—or failed to benefit—from existing regional infrastructure projects like the GCC Power Grid or Arab Mashreq Road Network?

III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- What institutional or regulatory frameworks could be established to standardize border-crossing protocols across the region?
- What mechanisms can be adopted to ensure long-term monitoring, evaluation, and sustainability of infrastructure projects?
- How can the Arab League mediate differing national priorities to align regional objectives in infrastructure?
- How can infrastructure projects be made climate-resilient and inclusive for all states?

IV. Additional Resources

Time to Step Up: Promoting Regional Infrastructure Integration through PPPs

This World Bank publication discusses the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in advancing regional infrastructure integration.

AIIB and Arab Fund Forge Strategic Partnership to Advance Sustainable Infrastructure Development

This Arab Fund press release announces a partnership between the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Arab Fund, aiming to promote sustainable infrastructure investments across the Arab world.

Infrastructures and Power in the Middle East and North Africa

This IEMed publication analyzes how infrastructure development in the MENA region is tied to political influence, resource control and regional power dynamics.

Cross-Border Payments in the Middle East Become More Inclusive

This Asian Banker explores recent efforts to improve the accessibility, efficiency, and equity of cross-border payment systems across the Middle East

Topic IV: Investigating means of supporting the economic development of territories and countries impacted by war and conflict

I. Introduction

A. General Background

In addition to the devastating loss of human life, widespread displacement, and long-term psychological trauma caused by war, conflict imposes equally profound economic burdens that can set back development by decades. Armed conflict and war have long-lasting and multidimensional impacts on economic development, particularly in low and middle income countries. When war erupts, it often results in widespread destruction of physical capital, including infrastructure, machinery, housing and commercial property.[83] This can completely disrupt a nation's productive capacity. Beyond physical damage, human capital is also severely affected, with labor forces diminishing by displacement, injury or death, and educational systems disrupted for years or even generations.[84] In Afghanistan, decades of conflict left millions of children out of school, with UNICEF estimating that as of 2021, 4.2 million Afghan children were not receiving formal education.[85]

Globally, studies show that countries directly afflicted by war experience an average of a 30% decline in economic output over five years, while inflation rises by approximately 15 percentage points. The consequences extend outside of combat zones as well, with neighboring and nearby non-belligerent states also suffering economically, facing output losses of around 10% and inflation increases of about 5% during the same period. This cross-border impact demonstrates the ripple effects of violent conflict.[86] For example, the ongoing war in Ukraine has led to significant slowdowns in Poland and Moldova's economies as millions of refugees crossed their borders, straining social services and labor markets.[87] War reduces GDP per capita in both the short and long term, the decline is driven by decreased labor productivity and diminished total factor productivity, often caused by a combination of capital destruction, disrupted investments, and reduced trade. In economic terms, war introduces uncertainty, restricts normal business operations and often leads to soaring public debt as governments redirect funds toward military spending. Although war can temporarily stimulate demand in regard to weapon production or reconstruction efforts, the effect is often overstated. The "broken window fallacy" demonstrates that while war-related spending may create jobs or output, it diverts scarce resources away from more productive, peace-time investments such as education,

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[83] Federle, Jonathan . "Economic Fallout: The Price of War." Kiel Institute, 14 Feb. 2024, www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/news/economic-fallout-the-price-of-war/.
[84] Thies, Clifford, and Christopher Baum. "The Effect of War on Economic Growth." Cato.org, 2020, www.cato.org/cato-journal/winter-2020/effect-war-economic-growth#.
[85] "Children in Afghanistan," www.unicef.org, 2021, https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/children-afghanistan.
[86] Ibid., 83
[87] "Two Years on Ukrainian Refugees in Neighbouring Countries Struggle to Make Ends Meet," NRC, April 16, 2024, https://www.nrc.no/news/2024/april/two-years-on-ukrainian-refugees-in-neighbouring-countries-struggle-to-make-ends-meet/.

healthcare and infrastructure. For example, the cost of the Iraq war was estimated to be approximately $860 billion by the end of 2009.[88] Resources could have otherwise been used to improve national well-being.

Conflict can also foster inflation, cost-push inflation emerges as goods become scarce, especially essentials such as fuel and food. If the productive capacity of an economy collapses, governments may resort to excessive money printing which can lead to hibernation, as seen in post-war Hungary and Austria (1946). After the 1990 Gulf War, global oil prices more than doubled, exacerbating inflation and fueling instability far beyond the Middle East.[89] During wartime, governments often borrow heavily, justified by public support and national priorities. However, this surge in public debt creates long-term fiscal vulnerabilities, especially in countries with limited economic resilience. Civil wars can be especially damaging as trust in institutions is eroded, scaring off both domestic and foreign investment. The Democratic Republic of Congo's civil war cost the country an estimated £9 billion, equivalent to nearly 30% of its GDP.[90] South Sudan's civil war caused foreign investors such as international oil companies to pause operations, crippling one of the nation's only revenue streams.[91]

Post-conflict recovery presents both challenges and opportunities. Successful economic reconstruction must go beyond rebuilding pre-war structures, it requires structural transformation. The goals of post-conflict reconstruction must be holistic, encouraging security and peace while reestablishing infrastructure and basic services, reintegration of displaced populations and laying the foundation for a robust private sector and long-term economic sustainability.[92] These efforts typically involve humanitarian relief, the restoration of roads and utilities, relaunching health and education systems and stabilizing national currencies. The global importance of post-conflict development is especially clear in current events. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has had massive consequences for not only regional peace, by destabilizing Eastern Europe and reshaping NATO and EU priorities, but also for the global economy, disrupting energy markets, straining food supply chains through blockages of Ukrainian grain exports, fueling inflation worldwide, and promoting unprecedented sanctions that have continued to reverberate across international trade and finance.[93] Energy and food markets have disrupted, inflation worldwide has increased.[94] As the need for a global community contemplates post-war

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[88] Pettinger, Tejvan. "Economic Impact of War - Economics Help." Economics Help, 31 Mar. 2017, www.economicshelp.org/blog/2180/economics/economic-impact-of-war/.
[89]Ibid.
[90]Ibid., 88
[91] Kim Lewis, "Conflict Stifles South Sudan's Oil Industry," Voice of America (Voice of America (VOA News), July 13, 2015), https://www.voanews.com/a/oil-conflict-revenue-investment-production-instability-sudan-globaldata/2859593.html
[92] Tzifakis, Nikolaos . "Post-Conflict Economic Reconstruction." The Princeton Encyclopedia of Self-Determination, 2023, pesd.princeton.edu/node/586.
[93] OECD, "IMPACTS of the RUSSIAN INVASION of UKRAINE on FINANCIAL MARKET CONDITIONS and RESILIENCE Assessment of Global Financial Markets," 2022, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/05/impacts-of-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-on-financial-market-conditions-and-resilience_a29d11b1/879c9322-en.pdf.
[94] Rogoff, Kenneth. "The Long-Lasting Economic Shock of War." International Monetary Fund, Mar. 2022, www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2022/03/the-long-lasting-economic-shock-of-war.

recovery strategies, the need for sustained international cooperation, strategic investments and peace-oriented economic planning is more pressing than ever.

B. History in the Arab World

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been one of the most conflict affected areas in the world over the past two decades, facing repeated cycles of violence, economic disruption, and displacement.[95] Since the early 2000s, conflict has increasingly defined the region's development trajectory. With the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, political instability expanded significantly under the Arab uprisings of 2011.[96] Countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen have also descended into prolonged civil wars, while more recent occurrences, such as the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict and clashes in southern Lebanon, have further exacerbated regional fragility.[97]

The economic costs of these conflicts have been immense. War and political instability have triggered capital flight, widespread destruction of infrastructure, disruption of trade, and the loss of skilled labor. In conflict-affected areas, productivity has sharply declined. Some estimates suggest that GDP per capita in countries hit by civil war remained 28% below pre-conflict levels for even a decade later. The World Bank reported that in the 1990s and 2010s, the average number of armed conflicts in the MENA region more than doubled, reversing decades of economic progress.[98] The effects are not limited to the individual war zones. Economic fallouts due to conflict often spread across borders, weighing heavily on neighboring countries. Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco have all experienced declining growth in recent years due to the regional instability, refugee flows and disrupted trade ties. The regional burden of hosting displaced populations combined with economic stagnation, has placed immense strain on these governments. There is a substantial humanitarian cost of war in the Arab world, between 2009 and 2023 the number of displaced persons in the MENA region rose dramatically, placing it in the highest in the world. Conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq and Palestine have created generations of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), compounding the region's development challenges. In Gaza alone, the damage inflicted by the ongoing war has been estimated at between $20 and $90 billion for reconstruction efforts. Analysis suggests that it could take decades just to return to its 2006 levels.[99]

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[95] "Extreme Poverty Is Rising Fast in Economies Hit by Conflict, Instability." World Bank, World Bank Group, 27 June 2025, www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/06/27/fragile-and-conflict-affected-situations-intertwined-crises-multiple-vulnerabilities.

[96] "Human and Development Costs of the Middle East's Protracted Conflicts." IISS, 2019, www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/12/human-and-development-costs-of-the-middle-easts-protracted-conflicts/.

[97] Hamzawy, Amr. "Ending the New Wars of Attrition: Opportunities for Collective Regional Security in the Middle East." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025, carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/ending-the-new-wars-of-attrition-opportunities-for-collective-regional-security-in-the-middle-east?lang=en.

[98] Ibid., 96

[99] Ibid., 96

Post-conflict reconstruction efforts in the region ideally aim to restore infrastructure, revive economic activity and foster long-term development. However in practice, reconstruction is often impacted by geopolitical agendas, donor preferences and domestic power struggles. Often the scope, scale and timing of reconstruction are determined by several factors: the availability of financial and technical resources, the manner in which conflict ends, the existence of credible political process, and pre-war institutional and economic landscape.[100] Heavily centralized pre-war economies may struggle to attract private investment post-conflict without substantial reform, while weak institutions may undermine aid effectiveness. Geoeconomic dynamics play a role in determining how reconstruction efforts are implemented. Regional powers and interactional actors often challenge aid, credit and investment in ways that align with their strategic interests, this unfortunately can sideline local priorities and create discrepancies resulting in the uneven economic recovery efforts.[101]

According to the World Bank, over a recent seven year period, per capita income in conflict-free MENA countries was, on average, 45% higher than in those experiencing war. This disparity represents a developmental setback equivalent to roughly 35 years of lost progress in affected states.[102] Ultimately, the economic challenges linked to conflict in the Arab world demonstrate the need for coordinated, forward looking strategies that support inclusive development.

C. Finding a Solution to the Problem: Past, Present, and Future

Supporting the economic development of countries and territories affected by conflict requires an understanding of past attempts, current interventions, and the systematic challenges within the region. Previously, post-conflict reconstruction in the Arab world, and globally, has followed a donor-driven model that emphasizes large-scale infrastructure and investment and short-term humanitarian assistance. While this approach has occasionally restored basic services and rebuilt public facilities, it has not always laid the groundwork for long-term economic transformation. In many cases, aid was distributed unevenly, lacked coordination among donors, or was tied to the political interests of external powers as opposed to the affected communities.[103]

A flaw in previous reconstruction efforts has been the limited focus on rebuilding physical infrastructure at the expense of deeper investments in human capital and institutional strength.[104]. Countries emerging from conflict frequently emphasized

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[100] Kerr, Malcom. "Conflict by Other Means: Postwar Reconstruction in Arab States." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021, carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/02/conflict-by-other-means-postwar-reconstruction-in-arab-states?lang=en.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Wright, Robin, and Peyton Dashiell. "Economic Challenges in the Middle East in 2025." Wilson Center, 2 Apr. 2025, www.wilsoncenter.org/article/economic-challenges-middle-east-2025.
[103] Barakat, Sultan, and Steven A Zyck. "The Evolution of PostConflict Recovery." Third World Quarterly, vol. 30, no. 6, 2009, pp. 1069–1086. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40388300, https://doi.org/10.2307/40388300.
[104] Heydemann, Steven. "Economic Development, Governance, and Human Security after the Arab Uprisings." Brookings, 26 Mar. 2025, www.brookings.edu/articles/economic-development-governance-and-human-security-after-the-arab-uprisings/.

reconstruction on basic services while not investing in building governance systems, inclusive economic frameworks. In today's Arab world, reconstructing economies is further complicated by interventions involving both state and non-state actors and intersecting international interests. Geoeconomic fragmentation, in which aid flows, loans and investments are allocated according to geopolitical alignments rather than local development priorities, is evident. This can delay post-conflict recovery and disconnect it from broader national rebuilding strategies.[105]

Long-term recovery must be treated not as a technical challenge of rebuilding, but as a political and social process of transformation. Strategies must reflect the pre-war economic structure, institutional legacies and social structure of each country. Prioritizing local agency by empowering local actors such as municipalities, civil society and local businesses are essential for designing contextually relevant, sustainable development strategies. Meeting immediate needs remains a crucial first step. Populations affected by conflict require reliable access to healthcare, food, housing and education, being especially mindful of more vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and the extremely poor. Governments need to restore core infrastructure including roads, electricity, clean water and telecommunications, alongside restarting essential services such as schools and hospitals.[106]

Over the longer term, economic revitalization depends on rebuilding public institutions that are able to provide a stable foundation for private investment. This could involve establishing new governingment bodies, legal systems to protect property rights, and financial institutions that can extend credit and financial services to larger segments of the population. Rebuilding confidence in national currencies, reforming trade policies and fostering macroeconomic stability are all pieces of the puzzle when creating inclusive economic growth.[107]

International organizations, like the World Bank and IMF have coordinated with regional stakeholders to support these efforts, but more comprehensive and locally responsible strategies are needed.[108] Successful recovery requires national governments, civil society and the private sector working together to create effective development plans. The voices of conflict-impacted nations must be centered in the design of future recovery programs to ensure solutions reflect their realities and priorities.

II. Questions to Consider in Your Research

[105] Kerr, Malcom. "Conflict by Other Means: Postwar Reconstruction in Arab States." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021, carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/02/conflict-by-other-means-postwar-reconstruction-in-arab-states?lang=en.
[106] Michelle Maiese. "Reconstruction." Beyond Intractability, Nov. 2003, www.beyondintractability.org/essay/reconstructive-programs.
[107] International Monetary Fund. "The IMF's Annual Macroprudential Policy Survey – Objectives, Design, and Country Responses. Policy Papers, no. 024, Apr. 2018. International Monetary Fund eLibrary," https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/007/2018/024/article-A001-en.xml.
[108] Essaid, Salim A. "Arab, IMF and World Bank Coalition to Support Recovery of Region's Countries Devastated by War." The National, 17 Feb. 2025, www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2025/02/17/saudi-arabia-imf-world-bank-coalition-group/. Accessed 31 July 2025.

- What are the primary economic consequences of recent or ongoing conflicts in your country?
- Has foreign aid or international support reached conflict-affected areas in your region and how effective has it been?
- How can the needs of displaced populations be economically addressed in a sustainable way?
- What role could regional institutions, such as the Arab Fund for Development and Social Development, play in coordinated economic recovery?

III. Questions a Resolution Might Answer

- What benchmarks should be used to evaluate the progress of economic recovery in conflict-affected areas?
- What safeguard can be proposed to prevent corruption or mismanagement of reconstruction funds?
- How can countries ensure the inclusion of local actors, such as municipalities, civil society and local business, in the design and implementation of recovery plans?
- What measures can be taken to ensure international aid and investment are equitably distributed across conflict-affected areas?

IV. Additional Resources

Wars, Capital and the MENA Region

POMEPS explores how war in the MENA region not only destroys physical infrastructure but reshapes economic geography and capital flows.

The Economics of Post-War Recoveries and Reconstructions

CEPR Examines the economic dynamics of post-war recovery across the globe, identifying key trends.

A Guide to Economic Growth in Post-Conflict Countries

A GSDRC guide outlining strategies for the promotion of economic growth in post-conflict states.

How Might a Wider Middle East Conflict Affect the Global Economy?

This Economics Observatory article analyzes the global ripple effects of conflict escalation in the Middle East, with a focus on energy markets, inflation and trade flows.