CIVIC ROLE OF ARAB UNIVERSITIES

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SUMMARY

Arab universities' civic role is an issue that has not been raised before in the Arab world. The Lebanese Association for Educational Studies (LAES) broached the subject considering that Arab universities seem to be delinquent in the civic formulation of the elite, and considering that these universities are ideally in the right position to disseminate civic values and practices, such as democracy, citizenship, and culture of law. LAES, and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) collaborated in order to organize this key regional conference on the civic role of Arab universities.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Tarek Mitri, Director of the Issam Fares Institute, addressed AUB's role in motivating its students to get involved in civic and voluntary work, and the Institute's role in urging researchers to include recommendations in their studies that help public policy-making. In her speech, Dr. Nada Mneimneh, president of LAES, explained that the region is going through difficult political circumstances while witnessing conflicts and extremism. She also stated that the conference seeks to explore the relationship between the situation at universities and the political conditions in Arab countries.

THE NEED FOR A CIVIC ROLE

There are two reasons that motivate us to think about a so-called 'civic role' for Arab universities, in addition to their educational and research roles. The first is the neo-liberal and economic tendency that characterizes institutions of higher education around the world, which is a tendency that prioritizes competition and labor market demands. In the 90's, sharp criticism of this model started to emerge because it puts less emphasis on social, political and ethical issues, while marginalizing teaching social studies and placing teachers at the mercy of short-term contracts. This criticism evolved into a counter-tendency which was shaped by the Presidents' Declaration on Civic Responsibility of Higher Education, which was followed by the Talloires Declaration on the "civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education" (2005). This declaration was signed by 29 university presidents in 23 countries, including four Arab countries. And in 2012, the number of signatories reached 247 universities and colleges from around the world. Some of the Arab universities established "Ma'an – Arab University Alliance for Civic Engagement" as a regional subnet of the Talloires Declaration.

This economic model applies to private universities, however, it doesn't apply to Arab public universities, and this is where the second reason lies. We shall assume that these universities adopt another model which we will call the "political model". By political model we mean the prevalence of political considerations in university governance, i.e., administrative, financial, and even academic decisions are subject to considerations imposed by the political authority, including appointing, promoting, and hiring of faculty. It also means looking into the university's political environment, including discourse, programs, activities, etc. in addition to the dominance of inculcation, and possible restrictions on academic freedoms. Politics doesn't just come into play from higher authorities, it also comes from faculty and students whenever political disputes intensify at universities.

The start of the "Arab Spring" and the dramatic changes that took place in several Arab countries were the reason for establishing a research project on the civic role of Arab universities at the Lebanese Association for Educational Studies, and the conference was part of this project.

We came to an agreement that the civic role is reflected in topics such as: democracy, citizenship, culture of law, teaching social studies, public service, civic commitment, and the pedagogy of investigation and deliberation. Addressing this subject at the conference is intended to look into what Arab universities provide or may provide in regards to a civic environment and necessities for their students.

CIVIC COMMITMENT AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CENTERS TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT

A number of scholars presented the role of universities in public policy-making in the Arab world, particularly highlighting the challenges faced throughout the process. Dr. Rima Nakkash presented AUB's experience in supporting the campaign against smoking in Lebanon, which supported the civil society's efforts in lobbying for Law 174 that prohibits smoking in public places in the country. These research-based efforts, which lasted three years, targeted public opinion and parliamentarians, and were successfully concluded with the issuance of Law 174 on 29 August 2012. Dr. Nakkash and the AUB team continue to lead efforts to raise awareness within the society for the need to implement the law, despite the developments that have so far impeded enforcing this law. Dr. Hiba Abu Shnaif presented the example of the Gerhart Center (American University in Cairo) in formulating "the new generation" of leaders and civil society leaders, and promoting a favorable environment for social and responsible citizenship in Egypt. However, organizational, political, and environmental challenges inhibited the Center's role. Participants raised questions about the ability of university research centers to influence governmental policy-making in Arab countries and called for the continuous work with governments and public opinion in order to positively affect public policies.

Dr. Ghada Al-Jouni demonstrated that from a practical perspective, universities that have joined the Talloires Declaration or the Ma'an Alliance regarding civic commitment didn't differ in their discourse from any other Arab university. Only three universities that follow an American model were distinguished with their focus on this subject, which partially explains why private sector universities are more interested in civic commitment than public universities.

Democracy in Universities

Dr. Moneer Sa'idani considered that university discourse about democracy is manifested in addressing freedom of speech, academic freedom, and participation, in addition to exploring the idea of 'democracy' in and of itself. Based on this, he concluded that the democracy discourse in most Arab universities is weak, and so are the activities that address such topics. As for university curricula, he stated that 0.3% of university programs and 0.2% of

their funds are related to studying democracy. He also mentioned that this topic is completely absent in 24 out of 36 universities surveyed.

Yemen presents a different situation. The law guarantees freedom of academic work, respect of other's opinion, and promoting a culture of dialogue, however, Dr. Adel Shojaa' stated that those who control the teachers' syndicate and students' union are engaged in partisanship and intolerance in their discourse and work conduct, which disrupted academic freedom and led to repression, due to the dominance of politics in university affairs.

The infiltration of politics into the university is typical within the case of the Lebanese University whereby political parties govern the university life and transform democracy within the institution. Ms. Ayat Noor Addin indicated this in her paper on student activities in one of the faculties at the Lebanese University. And according to Mr. Fadhl Al-Mosawi, the difference in student councils' influence that ranges from strong influence at the Lebanese University to weak influence at AUB also reflects the impact of a "bottom-up authority" in the Lebanese and Yemeni models.

In Tunisia, democracy in public universities seems to be more developed in comparison to other countries, despite the fact that university discourse is almost non-existent. Dr. Al-Taher Bin Yihya attributes this to the changes in the Tunisian political scene since 2011. Laws guaranteeing academic freedoms were developed and integrated in the new Tunisian constitution. The Tunisian university space was truly transformed to a space where freedom and democracy were openly practiced whether by researchers and academics or students and university staff. He concluded that developing universities towards playing their civic and social roles requires not only a new and groundbreaking legislation package, but also a civic and citizenship culture that is yet to be well-established. Dr. Rawda Bin Othman concluded in her paper that the emerging democracy in Tunisia is bound to influence democratic governance of universities in the country.

Participants raised two recurring points, the first is the difference between law and discourse on the one hand, and implementation on the other. The second point is students' negative attitudes towards university management and teachers: is this a sign of democracy or pursuing success with the least effort possible? In this regard, one of the participants said that university students' "riots" is a healthy matter from a historical perspective, and that most political leaders in his country (Morocco) were former student union members.

Citizenship, Human Rights, and Culture of Law

Citizenship in the university is represented by the values, knowledge, human rights practices, equality, and indiscrimination, in addition to diversity, dialogue, and national identity. Dr. Huwaida Adli Roman indicated that national identity is focused on twice as much in comparison to other values. It is feared that this could be similar to a former inclination that is based on aborting diversity on the pretext of nationalism and patriotism. It is notable that university discourse focuses more on obligations rather than rights and that out of 36 universities surveyed, only 7 universities had 25 educational programs surrounding citizenship.

There are a few courses here and there regarding citizenship education, however, human rights courses are more popular in Arab universities, but the question remains as to the effectiveness of teaching these courses. Dr. Sahar Qaddori Al-Rifai's and Dr. Ibrahim Sa'id Al-Baidhani's paper states that Iraqi universities shifted from a uniform course entitled "National and Patriotic Culture" in the era of Saddam Hussein, which reflected the former political regime's approach, to more diversified courses after Saddam Hussein entitled "Human Rights", however, it is being taught in circumstances that are plagued by civil violence and human rights violations inside universities. The participants almost unanimously agreed that human rights courses being taught in Arab universities are still primitive and technical, and they rely heavily on memorizing. One of the participants mentioned that some teachers aren't able to explain some of the basic concepts of human rights and that it's unnecessary to add a new course for every concept that international organizations raise. Others mentioned that human rights concepts have become common in the university community and that human rights violations are being exposed there. One of the participants suggested conducting a comparative study surrounding teaching human rights in various Arab universities.

Dr. Adnan Al-Amine considered that universities have the duty of disseminating the culture of law, and that this dissemination should reflect the rule of law in universities. Culture of law means mentioning rules and regulations, accountability and transparency, rights and obligations, and ethics and intellectual property in discourse. It also means teaching legal courses in departments other than the law department and practicing extracurricular activities that address legal issues. Dr. Al-Amine's paper explored the scope and content of the culture of law in a sample of 36 universities. The results indicated that this culture is marginalized in discourse. It also indicated that public universities are more interested in law than private universities. This contrast is evident in discourse, activities and curricula.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

The concept of community service is present in the discourse of most Arab universities. There are even some departments that are dedicated to community service in a number of countries and universities (public universities in Egypt). Dr. Al A'rifeh's paper proposed two ways to understand this matter. The first relies on the voluntary and local community service sense and the other on the university's commitment to society service as a whole. Dr. Mosa Ftail also indicated that most of the strategies of private higher education institutions (vision, mission, and values) in Bahrain include texts that refer to community service, however, these texts do not reflect the reality in any way or form.

TEACHING HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL STUDIES AND TEACHING METHODS

The conference organizers believe that teaching humanitarian studies is an integral part of the civic role of Arab universities because without teaching this kind of studies as specialized courses, graduates would become merely tools and merchandise in the job market or they may become subordinates of the political authorities. Teaching humanitarian and social studies is an essential factor for all civic concepts such as democracy, citizenship, and culture of law. This is the true significance of "Liberal Arts" in American education. Dr. Khaled Abd Al-Fattah's paper drew attention to the fact that many Arab universities teach these studies, however, the topic is rarely present in the university discourse itself, i.e., university administrations are unaware of the importance of this branch of knowledge or are implicitly undervaluing it.

The fact of the matter is that there are serious problems in teaching humanitarian studies. This is not exclusively due to university administration, as teachers of these studies share part of the responsibility. Dr. Mohammed Saleh Rahil says in his paper about teaching social studies in Libya that social study courses now serve the interests of official political institutions that enact laws, provide funding, and set conditions, and that this was accompanied by weakness in civil society organizations. Professor Hala Abi Saleh presented evidence from students on the content and traditional teaching methods of political science teachers in one of the public universities. Dr. Kamal Abou Shedid, who conducted a study on the discourse of 36 Arab universities, stated that only 1.7% of the words used in the discourse of these universities addressed concepts such as: cooperative learning, solving problems, critical thinking, applications, and discussion/debate. One of the participants drew attention to printed booklets in a number of Egyptian public universities that students use to memorize the answers for the exams.

Dr. Anne Clément's paper sheds light on the widely ignored phenomenon of reading groups that appeared outside the scope of recognized higher education institutions in Egypt after the January 25 revolution. The paper is based on the assumption of a silent "revolution," deduced from an experiment and from the vision presented in Rancière's emancipatory model of education and De Certeau's concept of "reading as poaching." Dr. Clément argues that these various reading groups largely contributed to redefining the nature of the learning experience for participants and how they understand knowledge.

Synthesis

Dr. Adnan Al-Amine presented a synthesis at the start of the conference which showed that civic components combined constitute about 10% to 15% of the overall discourse, programs, and courses at universities as shown in the graphs below. He also indicated that there are only 13 out of 36 universities that exceeded the average in the three measurements used and that there is only one university that exceeded the average in all three measurements together, which is the American University of Beirut.

Figure 1

Percentage of Civic Issues in University Discourse
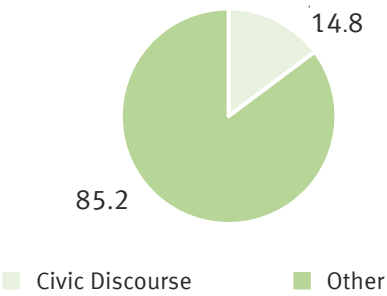
Total: 542,157 words

14.8

85.2

□ Civic Discourse ■ Other

Figure 2

Percentage of Civic Credits in University Funds

Total: 509,779 credits

14.8

85.2

□ Civic Credits ■ Other
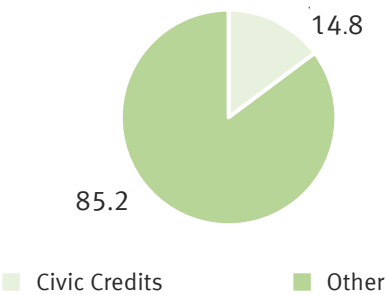
Figure 3

Percentage of Civic Programs in University Programs

Total: 5,783 programs

10.4

89.6

□ Civic Programs ■ Other
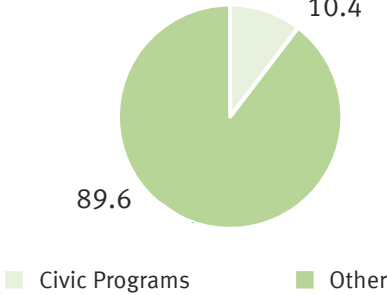
General University Results Table

UNIVERSITY	DISCOURSE		PROGRAMS		COURSES	
	%	N.º	%	N.º	%	N.º
Tunis Al-Manar University			●	●		
Alexandria University			●	●	●	●
Asyoot University			●	●		
American University in Cairo	●	●	●	●		
Lebanese University			●	●		
American University of Beirut	●	●	●	●	●	●
Louaize University	●	●	●	●		
Saint Joseph University			●	●		
Jordanian University			●	●	●	●
Birzeit University			●	●		
Princess Nora University	●	●				
Prince Sultan University	●	●				
Qatar University					●	●

ABOUT
THE PROGRAM

Education and Youth Policy Program

The Education and Youth Policy Research Program aims at informing educational policy and promoting improved educational practices and achievement through an increased understanding of the issues of education in the Arab world and their impact on children and youth in the region. The program further aims at engaging in applied, policy-relevant research to help policy-makers make decisions based on best available information. The program will serve as a resource for government agencies and other institutions in order to shape the education and youth policy debate through evidence.

ABOUT
AUB POLICY INSTITUTE

The AUB Policy Institute (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute.
Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy-relevant research in the Arab region.

We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

Main goals

▶ Enhancing and broadening public policy-related debate and knowledge production in the Arab world and beyond

▶ Better understanding the Arab world within shifting international and global contexts

▶ Providing a space to enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in and about the Arab world

▶ Disseminating knowledge that is accessible to policy-makers, media, research communities and the general public

American University of Beirut
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