

PATTERNS OF KNOWLEDGE  
PRODUCTION AND  
DISSEMINATION IN THE ARAB  
WORLD

The production of academic knowledge in the Arab world takes place along the following pattern:

- Official institutions sponsored by political authorities produce "party" or institutional knowledge and employ cultural workers and frameworks that legitimise their power.
  - Knowledge networks are connected to the Arab world's political parties or blocs, such as the *Al-Ahram* Political Studies Centre or the Centre for Arab Unity Studies.
  - Research centres connected to civil society, such as the Cairo Human Rights Centre, are rooted in specific issue campaigns. Various types of associations and federations fall into this cluster, such as the associations for channelling youth requests for employment in Morocco, or environmental preservation associations.
  - "Professional" research centres are set up either by researchers with former links to political regimes who seek to establish a strategic vision of international or Arab issues, or by academics under the banner of "providing customer services". These centres have become popular venues for the production of knowledge and depend largely on external financing.
  - Foreign research centres include the French Institute for the Near East, formerly the Centre for Studies and Research in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and the Centre for Studies and Research on the Contemporary Middle East (CERMOC) in Egypt. These establishments produce publications similar to those of national institutions and often serve as sanctuaries for national knowledge producers seeking academic outlets free from censorship.
- Open discussion in the Arab press on the distinction between the academic researcher and the political activist, and on the nature and objectives of externally financed scientific research at many of these centres, has helped to create more social space for knowledge producers.

BOX 8.2

**Knowledge and Governance in the Arab World**

A major reason for the halting, if not arrested progress of learning and cultural advancement in the Arab world may have been the failure of most Arab regimes, or so-called Arab systems, to relate to knowledge, in its multiple dimensions.

Obviously, contemporary rulers and those of yesteryear neither are, nor were, the "philosopher-kings" of Plato's Republic. And they were not expected to be in the first place. Yet in more simple and practical terms, from this governance gap there flowed a number of consequences:

- the rise of rulers from closed, semi illiterate backgrounds inclined to reject any participant in government who advocated the advancement of learning, or the enhancement of the quality of education and culture as objectives of statecraft, or who were committed to the exercise of academic freedom.
- disbelief among regimes in the need to seek cultural change based on those enlightened human values embodied in the Arab Renaissance of the 19th and early 20th century – values that have been rejected and crushed since the 1920's by a resurgence of religious extremism and arbitrary and self-serving interpretation.
- the negation of freedom of thought and expression in public education, including higher university levels, which accounts for the near absence of investment in research, particularly scientific research. The prevalence of state ideologies and autocratic approaches that have led to obscurantism and lack of innovation and of adequate standards for proper education. This in turn has reduced openness to modern technological advances and forward-looking intellectual discourse and debates.
- the absence, generally, as a corollary of absolutist governance, of critical thought. The obvious consequence of intolerant religious interpretations of values and ideals was the freezing of thinking into dépassé ideologies that permeated the minds and souls of a significant majority of so-called intellectuals. To such systems of values, any challenging ideas were considered punishable heresies. Many revolutionary philosophies were denigrated as "self-proclaimed" concepts that did not stand the test of history and time. This attitude contributed to defeats in almost every field - political, diplomatic and military - whereby dependence on foreign assis-

tance and science became nearly total. The glorification of leaders and their systems led to rulers being equated with the nation, which rendered abject submission compulsory, and thus the persecution of free thinking inadmissible. Witness the endless numbers of jailed dissenters. Leadership was not questioned and the authority of the day, no matter how corrupt or despotic, was above accountability.

- hostility to creative literature, not to mention creative philosophic writing, which was unwelcome and often censored. Intellectual openness to new horizons of modern culture was next to nil, new ideas were held to be unwelcome and destructive and only entered Arab societies through limited windows of opportunity.

The above might be considered a harsh caricature were its consequences not reflected in two major measurable facts:

- regression in literacy and reading, as evident in the decline of Arab writing and publishing.
- The emigration of creative artists that reject conformity. Introversion in the arts became reflected in strange forms of unintelligible surrealism, when not imprisoned in naturalistic landscapes.

A strange polity was born where excessive consumerism sometimes combined with an utter lack of imagination and inventiveness.

Thus, the distressful spectacle of an Arab world where immense wealth was illicitly managed by despotic systems accumulating obscene fortunes while production, except of oil, sank, as did the Arab share of international trade. The people continued to live in a state of ignorance and indescribable poverty, hardly benefiting from this accumulated wealth and unaware of even their most elementary rights to rebel or revolt, rights denied them by an oppressive force, the objective ally of neo-colonial exploitation. See Iraq!

In conclusion, the political outcome of this situation, in the present context, is at one and the same time a sense of tremendous frustration, and a search for "purity" through invitations - at this stage merely invitations - to soul-searching and self-criticism.

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