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Arab Education: The Front Line on the War on Terror

by Michael J. Hillyard

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Introduction

“These things happened. They were glorious and they changed the world... and then we f****d up the end game.”

–Congressman Charlie Wilson^[1]

Whether or not one believes in the necessity of the Bush Administration’s “global war on terror,” it is generally accepted that a stable Arab region is possible only through the inspiration of Arab hearts and minds. Many of the Arab population’s uneducated, religiously inspired zealots’ hearts and minds have not been won over in the face of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; in fact, they have likely hardened against America and the global economy it represents, and those hearts may never bend. Regarding the next generation of Arabs, the stakes are high both for them and the rest of the world, because at the region’s 15,000 births-per-day rate, tomorrow’s potential intifada ranks of recruits only multiply.

The path to security, stability, civil society, and economy in the Middle East is ultimately through education, not military might, and it will take a generation, not a few years of U.S. military deployment cycles, to complete the process. Education among all 22 Arab countries’ citizens holds the best long term promise for global security and stability under a basic premise: invest people with an opportunity to fully understand and participate in the civil society and economy of the twenty-first century, and they will buy into, contribute, and improve that society and economy through their own resolve and to their own satisfaction.

The delivery of the Arab region’s education must be proffered, not as an education offered *to Arabs by the industrialized world*, but as an education system delivered *by Arabs for Arabs*, with the support of the world’s education establishment when, where, and in the form it is requested. As a model that fuses local delivery and international expertise, the Arab Open University serves as tomorrow’s best hope to turn a would-be uneducated Arab male from becoming a suicide bomber and liberate the Arab female with a full complement of human rights and dignities.

History and Description of Arab Open University

The Arab Open University (AOU) was founded in 2002 as a project of the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND) through the inspiration, vision, and planning of AGFUND President, Saudi Arabian Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, whose goal was to provide all Arabs an open, equal, affordable, and accessible higher education. A lifetime champion of human rights, Prince Talal is also the original 1980s-era founder of AGFUND itself, which is now the Arab region's leader in human development, particularly in initiatives to help its neediest and disenfranchised people.[2] Realizing he needed maximum participation throughout the Arab world for his expansive dream to educate all Arab people, Prince Talal headquartered AOU outside of Saudi Arabia in Kuwait, and he has also been careful to spread leadership in AOU's Chief Executive (titled "Rector") office, which has yet to be filled by a Saudi.

AOU's mantra follows Prince Talal's commitment to the less fortunate. It is a University of "openness": to people, ideas, values, opportunities, places, and methods.[3] AOU's curriculum is practical and economically relevant due to the fact that the University was founded in part to address a specific shortfall in the Arab region's economies, such as major shortages in teacher and professional education.[4] Saudi Arabian teachers, for example, are woefully underqualified, with many possessing a diploma lower than a baccalaureate degree and insufficient to address the many pedagogical, technical skill, and special education needs of the modern classroom.[5] Degree majors include business administration, information technology, English, and education.

Currently, Prince Talal's vision is being realized through 30,000+ students who enroll through AOU branches in six Arab countries (i.e., Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Bahrain, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, with the Saudi branch consisting of four campus locations around the country). Prince Talal's goal is exponential growth so all Arabs have an opportunity to learn: hundreds of thousands of students enrolled in campuses across all 22 Arab countries and territories. Early University milestones in the young institution are more modest, but they do include graduating a first class in 2007 of 526 students and achieving accreditation as a partner institution of the United Kingdom's Open University.

Student demographics support the "openness" vision. Approximately one-half of students are female and nearly 60 percent are older than the traditional college student, thus allowing working adults to go back and earn the degree they never achieved or use the education as a mid-career transition opportunity.[6]

One way to observe AOU's impact and its potential to educate a generation of Arab people who appreciate and participate in global society and economy is to analyze its influence in Saudi Arabia—the heart of Wahabism and home to fifteen of September 11th's terrorist hijackers. The AOU's Saudi Arabia branch has already made a name for itself in just a short period of time, not just within the AOU system, but throughout the region's higher education establishment. The branch was recently selected to join Eduniversal's International Scientific Committee's list of official business schools based on seven quality assurance criteria.[7] It was also recently ranked 68th among the top 100 universities in the Middle East and North Africa region by the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities.[8] The branch made bold social headlines, when in 2003, it promoted a woman for the first time in the Kingdom's history to a university Dean position.[9]



Arab Open University Founder, Prince Talal Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud

Saudi Arabia's Commitment to Higher Education

The AOU could not be reaching out and expanding in Saudi Arabia at a better time, and its arrival has certainly grabbed the attention of the House of Saud. Saudi Arabia's track record in the last half of the twentieth century was among the poorest of the industrialized world's higher education systems. The Ministry of Education, for example, was not established until as late as 1975, and in the years following its inception, it was controlled by the Wahabi elite, who focused curriculum rigidly on religious doctrine at the expense of general education, liberal arts, social sciences, and professional education.^[10] As a result, relatively low numbers of citizens in the 1970s-1990s were educated and trained in practical disciplines, and Saudi Arabia thus has had to import expatriates to run much of its internal industries, to include much of its domestic oil economy. As recently as 2003, the country had only eight universities to serve 22 million people (of whom 75 percent were of education age) and invested only one-quarter of one percent of its GDP on research and development.^[11]

Since taking the throne in 2005, King Abdullah has made investment in education a cornerstone of his 25-year strategic plan. The King has committed no less than one-third of the country's general budget to education and training.^[12] A recent *Economist* report cited Saudi Arabia education spending per capita now exceeds many leading industrialized nations, to include Japan, France, and Russia.^[13]

King Abdullah has addressed his commitment to education systematically, from the Kingdom's traditional elite students who eventually serve in top ministerial, corporate, and non-profit leadership positions, down through the middle class, to the traditionally marginalized citizens and non-citizens in such a way that there will one day be appropriate and accessible opportunities for all people at the level, income, and ability they can achieve.

At the elite level, major investments have been made in existing universities, and the King has also set aside a \$10 billion endowment through which the new King Abdullah University of Science and Technology is envisioned to attract, not only the Kingdom's finest students and

faculty but also the rest of the world's leading graduate sciences scholars, all of whom will be chosen solely on their academic and research abilities.[14]

At the level of the traditionally upper-middle class, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program annually sends over 40,000 Saudi citizens abroad to earn fully funded undergraduate and graduate degrees in America, Europe, and Asia, with emphasis in the fields of business, computer science, engineering, health sciences, and physical sciences.[15] The number of students studying overseas will likely double in the next five years, as evidenced by expanded articulation agreements with most industrialized nations. The Kingdom's agreement with France, for example, will triple its classroom seat presence from 600 to 2,000 annually beginning next year.[16]

In addition to sending more students overseas, the King's Ministry of Higher Education is also deeply committed to improving both access to and quality of university education at home. Engineering and computer science programs have grown from 16 to 57 and medicine has risen from 18 to 50 (with the addition of nine teaching hospitals as well).[17] Total seat capacity has grown to 300,000 students attending Saudi colleges and universities this year, which is up from an almost non-existent 7,000 students attending them in 1970.[18] The growth has been fueled by 20 new public institutions and the removal of an old ban on private institutions.[19] King Abdullah also announced a 2007 initiative to build 17 additional universities, several of which are dedicated to expanding the Kingdom's commitment to women's education and new fields of study.[20]

In all of the Kingdom's higher education planning, the lower strata of Saudi society have also been supported. The Ministry of Education's number one policy aim is, "to provide opportunities for education to every citizen of learning age..." which is effectively "*an opportunity for all.*"[21] Policy has been followed by action. The investment in community colleges, for example, shows growth more substantial than any other sector of higher education, with the number of two-year programs having expanded from four to 30.[22]

It is also with the lower strata in mind that the Arab Open University has been specially targeted to help support the Ministry's "opportunity" initiative. In 2007, the King authorized \$26.7 million for AOU's construction of buildings among its various Saudi branches, and in 2008, the country's accreditation agency accepted AOU's application for King Abdullah Scholarships consideration.[23]

An Education to What End? The National Qualifications Framework and National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment

As important as economic commitments to fund scholars, construct new universities, and create opportunities for previously disenfranchised people is the Kingdom's commitment to ensure the end result of its investment is a qualified graduate. As recently as 2006, the Kingdom released a National Qualifications Framework that clearly defines the terminology, degree levels, knowledge, skills, and values expected to be achieved at each higher education level, type, and domain of learning.[24] The Framework establishes new priorities that are in line with the ability for lifelong learning, effective communications, critical thinking, abstract thought, desire for initiative, and application of information technology.[25] As part of each institution's national accreditation process, it must prove that each of its academic programs achieves the Framework's learning outcomes.

Although the Framework is a step in the right direction, it may take years to overcome the Arab region's traditional approach to higher education, which was focused on rote memorization and recall of important religious and philosophical information. This approach was ingrained in early and secondary education and thus must be adjusted much earlier than the collegiate level. At the

lower education levels, the Ministry of Education's tone is clear in wanting to break from past ideology toward a more relevant and practical future. Its vision statement's major emphasis is to "create a spirit of action," and its leading academic outcome for its citizen-graduates is to, "be able to face international competition, both at the scientific as well as technological levels (and) to be able to meaningfully participate in overall growth and development."[\[26\]](#)

The concept of external third party review, validation, and accreditation, which is common in the industrialized world, is only a recent (i.e., 2007) concept for the Kingdom, but one that is moving rapidly forward. The Ministry of Higher Education formed the Kingdom's first independent accreditation body to oversee all higher education accreditation, and it is called the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA). The NCAAA has established accreditation criteria for all program- and institution-level standards, and the institutions are in the process of complying with the criteria in order to achieve their initial accreditation. The NCAAA has outsourced much of the early accreditation policy drafting to international accreditors, and in doing so, it has drawn best practices information from across the world's many different accreditation standards and avoided reliance on any single nation's approach. A review of the standards by a five-member international review panel indicates the Kingdom has a solid basis for accreditation in place; now institutions and programs must rise to meet the accreditation standards.

The AOU Model in Saudi Arabia

In a Saudi society in which males and females are strictly segregated, most higher education systems must either run every course or program twice through a male and female instructor, teach with a male instructor such that he cannot be visible to the female students (and the female students also cannot be visible to the male students), or exclude the female students altogether from an education. All three options are regularly employed, each with its own inefficiencies or inequalities inherent within it.

AOU, on the other hand, has uniquely combined the benefits of the traditional U.S. community college (which include low cost, regional classes, and night/weekend course scheduling) with those of distance education (which include anytime/anywhere Internet-based learning, remote instructors, and online library/learning resources), which thus allows a male instructor to teach both male and female students in an online environment and then all students through either a segregated classroom lecture or gender-specific onsite tutors. Since AOU courses are 25 percent onsite during nights and weekends and 75 percent online, the instruction can be delivered more efficiently than through the traditional Saudi residential instruction model, and it also allows female students access to the same curricula as males. Due to the fact that they cannot drive a car in Saudi Arabia, females are also more likely to complete an AOU distance education course than a traditional one. While it may not appear to be a major factor, getting a ride to class and securing child care coverage from a husband or other family member is actually much easier outside of traditional working hours, and AOU is the only institution teaching at those times.

For those students who do not receive scholarships or employer-funded tuition assistance, the cost per semester is very reasonably priced at approximately \$1,300 (USD), which includes tuition, text books, reference materials, multimedia technology, and support services, such as laboratory access and counseling.[\[27\]](#) Instruction and course materials are in English. The United Kingdom's Open University provides the entire curriculum and course materials for each degree program, consultancy to assist with operations, and accreditation and validation of the AOU program. As a result, the AOU Saudi Arabia campuses receive the benefits of a time-tested, validated western-style degree program with instant legitimacy.[\[28\]](#)

In the curricular process students progress first through entry-level English language testing and requirements, and once proficient, they move through the UK Open University's proven curricular

model of general university, core, major, and electives requirements.[29] Most courses possess two major learning assessments, each of which account for approximately half of the final course grade. The first assessment is a series of Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs). These assignments are essay-oriented homework assignments that combine information, analytical, logical, and deductive skills from the various textbooks, case studies, and other assignments provided to students in their course package. The other assessment is a closed-book and proctored final examination.

The instruction comes from a combination of full- and part-time faculty who are called tutors, and they possess standard graduate-level and discipline-relevant higher education credentials and experience, with the exception that AOU's tutors generally possess more work-related experience in the subjects they teach and less academic research experience than counterparts in traditional Saudi universities. Only 10 percent of tutors possess prior distance education experience when they arrive at AOU, so AOU provides a combination of written and onsite distance education instruction for the new tutors prior to their first teaching assignment.



Arab Open University's Saudi Arabia Branch Headquarters

Why the AOU Model Works

The value of an AOU education as seen from its Saudi Arabian branch director is strategic and transformative. Dr. Abdullah Al-Salamah believes that access to knowledge will be the long term value provided to AOU students who will graduate into a globally connected and competitive world. Al-Salamah's definition of knowledge includes being literate enough to access knowledge, and in a Kingdom in which Arabic is the tongue of the realm, reading for knowledge and pleasure is not the customary pastime it is in civilizations east and west. Arabic offers plenty of reading material in Islamic philosophy but much less than other global languages in commercial, academic, and research applications. Al-Salamah takes a hard line with the curriculum, tutors, and students, and demands the entire University operate in English, thus forcing each student's adoption of a second language as a de facto degree program outcome regardless of the student's academic major. Al-Salamah believes that the tri-fold combination of an AOU program that produces English-language competency, discipline-specific knowledge, and the ability to find new English-language knowledge through readily available sources such as Amazon.com and the Harvard Business Review, will produce Saudi Arabia's version of an educated participant in global society.[30]

The benefits of AOU are seen by both its male and female students, but for very different reasons tied to Saudi culture gender differences. Male students enjoy the program because they typically have full-time jobs, little disposable income, family responsibilities, and no other access to higher education within the Kingdom, which is typically due to their undistinguished academic performance in secondary school, poor English language skill, and/or lack of Saudi citizenship. Female students enjoy the program because the Kingdom offers vastly fewer higher education seats for them than men, cultural biases within the family and society that invest higher education time and resources in males, little or no post-education jobs for women in a society that emphasizes a woman's place as the home, motherhood responsibilities, and general time restrictions. Uniformly, students of both genders appreciate AOU's distance and night/weekend education, very low price, and nonselective admission as their *only* chance for a higher education.



Arab Open University Saudi Arabia Branch Director, Dr. Adbullah Al-Salamah

How AOU Can Further Shape Saudi Arabia's Future

AOU's Saudi Arabia branch faces many issues common to a new institution that it must address as it expands its student body, implements new academic degrees, and provides its education and services delivery. It currently struggles with its English-language requirement for students with low English proficiency levels. AOU pretests each student for English-language placement, requires completion of two first-year English courses, and offers a remedial course for struggling students, but these efforts still matriculate too many students to upper level courses in which the difficulties of mastering a major are exacerbated by the English language impediment. AOU has higher than average attrition, and some portion of attrition is naturally due to its open admissions policy, but the next major factor is the English language. AOU must strengthen its English language support services if it truly expects to transform into graduates an ever growing number of students who enter its program.

A second major issue is AOU's strict compliance with the foreign-licensed, UK-based curriculum, and this issue cuts both ways. Since the UK Open University version of each course is used in Saudi Arabia, the AOU courses possess little or no local case studies or examples.^[31] Therefore, students are, on the one hand forced to learn of global and western ways, but on the other hand they experience difficulty grasping new concepts while they are also attempting to absorb the

context of the concepts. One could argue benefits *and* drawbacks of studying in a foreign-based institution that provides little regard for local circumstance. As AOU evolves, perhaps a middle ground can be found.

A third major area of concern is cheating, and this issue is not unique to open universities or Saudi Arabia. The economic underpinning of any open university is to reduce transaction costs of the program in order to keep tuition low, and as a result, the AOU's Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) account for roughly 50 percent of the course grade, are easily reproduced each term for students, and are easily graded by faculty. The problem with TMAs is the ease in which students find the answers to the assignments from students who have gone through the assignments in prior terms. In Riyadh, a mini TMA black market has emerged due to AOU's student body growth in that city. Surveys indicate that students acknowledge TMA cheating is pervasive. In response, AOU has implemented software from an internationally recognized anti-plagiarism company to identify plagiarism from web or previously submitted essays, but additional solutions must be identified to curb the cheating or the AOU degree will lack validity.

A fourth concern is the AOU's ability to implement and follow through on a quality assurance plan. Quality assurance is a new concept in Middle East higher education, and while AOU has a quality assurance unit at its Saudi Arabia branch, and that unit has developed a comprehensive quality assurance plan, it did not do so until April 2008.[\[32\]](#) This unit has established quality assurance priorities and listed the status of each priority, the associated policy goal of each priority, and what must be accomplished to reconcile shortfalls between the current status and policy goal in each priority area. One quality assurance benefit of AOU versus other Saudi universities is that fact that it leverages the quality assurance program used by the UK Open University, so its curriculum, learning outcomes, and course materials enjoy the highly evolved status of the UK program. What the AOU currently lacks and still must implement are quality assurance processes in the areas that it locally controls, such as instructional delivery, personnel evaluation, support services, student counseling, career placement assistance, and remedial instruction. Developing these areas will be critical if AOU expects to be internationally recognized as a quality education institution.



Arab Open University Students in Computer Lab

International Higher Educators: Helping Saudi Arabia Realize Potential and Avoid Peril

The two fundamental transformations in Saudi society that the Kingdom's general commitment to higher education and an institution such as AOU will facilitate are: broad-based Saudi citizen participation in the global economy and the expansion of Saudi women's roles in society. Whereas at one time Saudi Arabian higher education did not produce enough trained and skilled professionals to operate its economy, it is now using the proceeds from an oil-based windfall to prepare Saudi students to hit the ground running in the global economy. Economic participation and women's liberation go hand-in-hand, since the Kingdom currently imports 25 percent of its labor force, due in some measure because women do not generally hold professional jobs. Saudi female students are focused as are their male counterparts on achieving a degree that will enable their participation in the global economy, but it is clear that they also take the education very seriously as an intellectual outlet that has been lacking in their roles as homemakers who are not allowed to function alongside males as equals in a restrictive society. The Saudi female clearly engages the AOU as an opportunity to pursue a life of the mind that will hopefully one day bring a new life in their physical world as well.

Industrialized nations, their Higher education institutions, and the people who work in them have the opportunity to assist Saudi Arabia's transition to a major player in the global economy. With more Saudis expected to be traveling overseas for education, host nations and their higher education institutions should welcome those Saudi students who wish to study, and all parties should encourage more opportunities for student visas, faculty exchanges with Saudi Arabian higher education institutions, and university-related work visas. If King Abdullah is willing to foot the bill to educate his country's citizens abroad, then U.S. and other countries' officials should be willing to educate the next generation of Saudi Arabians and not allow overly restrictive visa policies get in the way.

The second thing policy makers and higher education officials can work toward are more of their own branch campuses in the Middle East, and yet do so in such a way that it does not smack of something less than an education received in the sponsoring nation. Several private and public higher education institutions have attempted to open campuses within the Kingdom but have been rebuffed by the Ministry of Higher Education because those institutions would not allow for credits to transfer from the Saudi campus to the home campus. Saudi Arabia needs nothing short of an industrialized nation-equivalent higher education opportunity from institutions that wish to operate on its soil; otherwise, it appears as if foreign institutions are merely pandering to an oil-wealthy country by offering a diluted education in order to create a cash cow from which profits can flow back home.

The third thing that public officials and higher educators can do is get involved in the Middle East's nascent accreditation and regulatory processes to ensure they produce programmatic and institutional excellence among the region's colleges and universities. Middle East higher education leaders and faculty need assistance in developing and implementing outcomes assessment plans, quality assurance programs, strategic plans with annual accountability, continuous improvement cycles, performance evaluation systems, and the other bedrocks of sound academic operations. Services for part-time accreditation evaluators, consultants, and multi-year contractual personnel are in demand. Two resources for those interested in helping the international accreditation and regulatory process are the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) Portal on Higher Education Institutions (www.unesco.org) and the Council of Higher Education Accreditation's International Quality Review and Directory (www.chea.org). Country-specific information can be found through a web search of each country's ministry of education or accreditation agency.

The fourth thing that leaders can do is reach out to the AOU and partner with it to provide a baccalaureate-to-master's degree transition, study abroad opportunities, transfer of credit from AOU to home-based institutions, and access to their nation's distance education programs.

There is much that policy makers, civil servants, and higher education institutions and leaders can do to facilitate the education of the world's underserved populations. What all parties must avoid is the temptation to impose, not just militarily but also intellectually, on another society. Leaders should reach out and offer a helping hand, but in such a way that fits with the needs of the asking society or institution.



National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment's International Review Panel

Charlie Wilson famously said of the U.S. experience in aiding the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, "These things happened. They were glorious and they changed the world... and then we f****d up the end game."[\[33\]](#) Wilson was irreverently referring to the fact that United States policy makers took bold leadership and provided the funding necessary to militarily supply the Mujahideen in their successful fight against the Soviets. When hostilities ended in Soviet defeat, Wilson went back to the Congress for much smaller appropriations that were described as "pennies on the dollar" to support the construction of hospitals, schools, and other fundamental institutions upon which Afghan society could rebuild. He was steadfastly denied... and since September 11, 2001, citizens around the world know how that story ended because it was written by the Taliban in the absence of American leadership, which is still trying to correct its mistake in Afghanistan today.

The opportunity for engagement in Saudi Arabia and the other 21 Arab countries is through education for Arab people to receive the knowledge and skills they desperately want, that will become their intellectual passport to civil society and the global economy, and through which everyone will benefit through increased productivity and security. The world's policy makers and educators must do their part to ensure the opportunity becomes reality.

About the Author

Michael Hillyard is president of the University of St. Augustine. In June 2008 he served on a five-member international review panel to evaluate the Arab Open University's preparedness to award King Abdullah Scholarships to its students.

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