

EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP IN THE ARAB WORLD Key to the Future

Executive Summary

The Paper in a Nutshell

Reforming education to foster citizenship is urgently needed if democracy is to take hold in the Arab world. Under authoritarian rule, students were primarily taught to be docile subjects of the state—creative thinking was discouraged and information was treated as indisputable. Instead, students must learn from a very early age what it means to be citizens who seek and produce knowledge, question, and innovate. Only by teaching youth to think critically and respect different points of view will Arab countries become economically competitive and reliably democratic.

Vital Statistics

- Over the past forty years, Arab countries have invested an average of 5 percent of GDP in education, a relatively high figure by global standards.
- Yet most Arab educational systems fail to produce graduates with the skills and knowledge required to compete in today's global economy.
- Adult illiteracy in the Arab world is approximately 28 percent, nearly double the global average.
- Teaching in most Arab states continues to be highly didactic, teacher-directed, and not conducive to fostering critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.
- 70 percent of today's Arab population is under the age of thirty and more than one-third of the population is in or about to enter the K-12 system.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Prioritize education for citizenship: Over the long term, democracy will only thrive in a culture that accepts diversity, respects different points of view, and tolerates—even encourages—dissent. Leaders in the Arab world must begin laying the groundwork now by making citizenship education an urgent national priority.

Overhaul the classroom culture: Efforts to train responsible citizens begin with the classroom environment. Rather than the current lecture-based approach that prioritizes rote memorization of facts, Arab classrooms should be transformed to emphasize open discussion and active learning. In this way, students can be taught—not just through formal learning but, more importantly, through practice—to be well-informed, independent-minded members of society.

Recruit and retain highly qualified teachers: The role of teachers in the education process cannot be understated. Training and keeping highly qualified teachers—particularly those able to foster debate and see issues from multiple points of view—is imperative.

Build human capital: Current reform efforts in the Arab world focus heavily on constructing more schools, introducing computers, and increasing test scores in math and science. While necessary, these technical improvements are of limited value unless coupled with a much greater investment in the human capital of a free, democratic citizenry. By the twelfth grade, a student should be able to solve problems, write persuasively, collaborate, build consensus, and communicate with elected officials. By equipping students with these vital skills, countries emerging from the Arab awakening will be better positioned to consolidate democracy and compete successfully in the global economy.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION: *A full-length version of this study is available on the web at: carnegieendowment.org/muasher. For more information or to speak with one of our scholars, please do not hesitate to contact our government affairs manager, Scott Toussaint, at (202) 939-2307 or stoussaint@ceip.org.*

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