# One Key to Arab Reform Is Improved Literacy Skills

Jun 2, 2004

**Articles & Testimony**

In recent weeks, the Bush administration has circulated a revised draft of its Greater Middle East Initiative, a plan designed to support political, economic and social reform throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Reportedly, the new draft -- a version of which will be presented at the G8 summit in June -- has a more limited scope than the draft leaked to the daily Al-Hayat in February 2004 and criticized throughout the Arab world as a neo-imperial intervention. According to the Financial Times, the new draft contains five objectives that call for the establishment of the following: a democracy foundation, a democracy assistance group, a literacy corps, a micro-finance initiative, and a "forum for the future." For both substantive and strategic reasons, it is a positive sign that the literacy project -- a holdover from the original draft -- remains a core goal.

Although there are literacy success stories in the Arab world, the overall level of literacy in Arab countries is low, especially with regard to women. The most recent data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators reveal that literacy problems in the Arab world are a question not only of letters, but also of numbers. The literacy rates of smaller and wealthier Arab countries are generally higher than those of more heavily populated Arab countries.

Hence, when policymakers reach the stage of designing and implementing specific programs to address the literacy problems of the greater Middle East, they should focus efforts and resources on the poorest and largest countries, as their situations are the bleakest. Consider the following data, last updated in 2002 (though statistics for that year were unavailable for Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Qatar or Somalia):

Adult literacy (ages 15 and higher): The Arab world's literacy leader is Jordan, where 91 percent of adults are literate, including 86 percent of women. Following Jordan are Bahrain (89 percent for all adults, 84 percent for women), Kuwait (83 and 81 percent) and Syria (83 and 74 percent). At the other end of the spectrum are Yemen, Mauritania and Morocco, where female adult literacy rates are an abysmal 29, 31 and 38 percent, respectively. Total adult literacy in these countries is not much better (49 percent in Yemen and 41 percent in Mauritania). In Morocco, a country of 30 million, the adult literacy rate is only 51 percent. In fact, in Morocco, Sudan and Algeria combined -- each home to at least 30 million people -- there are as many as 37 million illiterate adults.

Young adult literacy (ages 15-24): The data for young adult literacy in the Arab world would seem more promising. More than 95 percent of those in the 15 to 24-year-old range in Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, Libya and Syria are literate, and 10 of the reporting Arab countries had young adult literacy rates of 90 percent or more. Yet, these 10 countries comprise just 34 percent of the 293 million Arabs living in the Arab world. Among poorer countries, young adult literacy rates were lowest in Mauritania (50 percent), Comoros (59 percent) and Yemen (68 percent), with young women's rates lagging even further behind (at 42, 52 and 51 percent, respectively). The relevant rates in Morocco were only slightly better (70 percent for all young adults, 61 percent for young women).

Conspicuously missing from this data was Egypt, a country of 66 million people (23 percent of the entire Arab world in terms of population) and the region's historic political and cultural leader. Even so, the most recent World Bank data for Egypt, from 1996, painted a grim picture. The total adult literacy rate was 56 percent (only 44 percent for

women), meaning that there were more than 29 million illiterate adults in Egypt alone. Total youth literacy was 73 percent (only 67 percent for young women).

Concentrating on literacy and basic education should positively affect many of the other areas requiring attention in the Arab world. For example, countries with education problems often face challenges related to health, poverty and political openness.

In Yemen, where the adult literacy rate was 49 percent in 2002, life expectancy was only 57 years, the infant mortality rate was 8.3 percent and annual population growth was 3 percent. Meanwhile, the country's per capita gross domestic product was only $330 (in 1995 US dollars), female participation in the labor force was 28 percent and there were just 65 radios (as of 1997) and 5 internet users per 1,000 people. Although Yemen has a multiparty electoral system and held parliamentary elections in April 2003, its political system and its citizens' political participation cannot be described as open.

A more educated citizenry is integral to building industrial and agricultural labor forces, improving public health and increasing political freedom. Beyond the practical benefit of employing literacy skills in work environments and using different training programs, workers with a basic education have more innovative tendencies and greater productivity.

With regard to public health, literate mothers are better able to access resources related to nutrition, contraception and medicine, thereby decreasing child mortality, lowering population growth rates and improving women's health through independent decision-making. As for political development, a literate public has more resources from which to gather information, increase its political awareness and reduce "conspiracy theory" reasoning.

For reform efforts on the literacy front to have a deep impact they must be used as a tool to address other human development problems. To be sure, reading works by Naguib Mahfouz offers its own rewards. However, if literacy programs are to succeed, they must also be tied to improved job opportunities that are appropriate to the economies of individual countries. Literacy programs must employ curricula that meet the practical needs of pupils.

In addition, literacy reform can lead directly to the creation of new jobs, not just through the training and employment of new teachers, but also through the construction of new schools and public libraries (especially in rural areas) that are friendly to the norms of conservative, traditional societies. For example, building new schools and libraries that are exclusively for girls (and which are therefore deemed safe places to send daughters) is a good investment. One of the Greater Middle East Initiative's central goals should be to embed the importance of literacy so deeply into a given country's economy and culture that the costs of being illiterate and raising illiterate children become prohibitive.

Although political criticism has shrouded the Greater Middle East Initiative, its call for a literacy corps is both a substantively worthwhile and politically safe endeavor on which to concentrate American support. This initiative gives Washington an opportunity to work with Europe, given that improving literacy is a goal entirely in line with the spirit of both the EU's Barcelona Process for Middle Eastern countries and the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue.

In addition, the tangible economic and health benefits that could accompany improved literacy rates are consistent with reforms that Arab governments seek to enact and which are politically difficult to oppose. Improved literacy is an important step toward a more politically informed citizenry and a platform upon which to build other reforms.

Benjamin Orbach is a research fellow, and Bjorn Delaney a research assistant, at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. This commentary was written for the Daily Star. ❖

Daily Star (Beirut)

## RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

## TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)