

# Still Open to Arabs

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



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**H**ave onerous post-Sept. 11 visa requirements denied young Arabs access to American colleges and universities?

That charge was made by the authors of the "Arab Human Development Report," published last month and prepared by respected Arab researchers under the auspices of the U.N. Development Program. Their condemnation of Washington's alleged anti-Arab bias, post-9/11, received headline coverage in national newspapers.

Specifically, the report accused the Bush administration of "extreme" counterterrorism policies that "led to the erosion of civil and political liberties ... diminishing the welfare of Arabs and Muslims living, studying or traveling abroad." The result, it argues, was the "cutting off [of] knowledge acquisition opportunities for young Arabs." The effect of these policies, the report claimed, was "an average 30 percent drop in Arab student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities between 1999 and 2002."

If true, that accusation would be a black stain on America's traditional openness to foreign students, and it would undermine the Bush administration's strategy of combating bin Ladenism by opening young Arab hearts and minds to one of America's showcase exports: its institutions of higher education.

But the charge is not true.

The small print in the report shows that the claim of a "30 percent drop" is derived from student enrollment numbers kept by just four Arab missions to the United Nations -- Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Yemen. Why the fine Arab scholars who contributed to the report would rely on data on just four of 22 Arab countries, drawn from such an odd source, is bewildering. Even so, the raw numbers provided by these missions tell a somewhat different story.

According to the Arab missions, Saudi Arabia -- which whisked hundreds of nationals out of the United States in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, well before the passage of the USA Patriot Act -- does indeed show a 31 percent drop in enrollment. But because of the disproportionately large number of Saudi students in the United States, the Saudi share of the enrollment decrease was 88 percent of the total decrease.

In essence, the hasty Saudi pilgrimage home skewed the overall story. By contrast, for example, students from Yemen -- itself a source of considerable anti-U.S. terrorism, such as the bombing of the USS Cole -- showed barely

any enrollment drop (188 students in 1999, 181 students in 2002).

A more comprehensive and nuanced view of the issue can be found in the statistics compiled by the Institute of International Education. The IIE's annual Open Doors survey provides a detailed breakdown of foreign students in the United States that goes back more than a decade.

The big story there is the roller-coaster fluctuation in Arab enrollment at U.S. universities. Enrollment from many Arab countries has been dropping for years. Yemen, for example, had 50 percent more students in the United States in 1992 than in 1999; Qatar's numbers dropped steadily every year between 1992 and 1997, only picking up in 1998. All of North Africa declined in the first half of the 1990s and increased in the second half.

Chief among the many reasons for this was the Arab economic recession of the post-oil-glut years, which even compelled oil exporters to tighten their belts on subsidizing overseas education. Indeed, the Arab scholars' report does not even mention that many Persian Gulf states long ago began instituting measures to limit the numbers of students going abroad, opting instead to expand less costly opportunities at home.

But didn't America's post-9/11 anti-terrorism policies, especially stiffer visa rules, still drive tens of thousands of Arab students away from our universities? It is undoubtedly true that many students suffered inconvenience and some may have, as a result, chosen to study elsewhere; getting the kinks out of the new visa system is an important priority. But the charge itself is simply false.

This month, the IIE issued a report showing just a 10 percent decrease in Middle East student enrollment in 2002-2003, the first full academic year since 9/11. While Saudis did register a steep decline, the overall statistics mean that most Arab countries are continuing to send substantial numbers of students to U.S. schools.

Indeed, there is no support for the accusation of a "30 percent drop" from pre-9/11 levels. According to the IIE, there were actually 6 percent more students from all Middle East countries enrolled in U.S. universities in 2002-2003 than in 1998-1999. ("Middle East" includes some non-Arab countries, such as Iran and Turkey, but all are governed by the new visa regulations.)

While the anecdotal evidence gets the headlines, the statistics tell the story: Despite 9/11, the doors to American higher education remain open to Arab students.

This article is adapted from one in the December issue of Commentary.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



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