

# **Revolutions, Transformations, and Higher Education: Changing Conceptualizations of the Role of the University<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

In the immediate aftermath of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, analysts, reporters, and many scholars characterized these uprisings as “youth revolutions.” Although analysis of context and causes has become much more nuanced and complex, the Arab Spring in its varied iterations has been consistently linked to disgruntled and disenfranchised educated youth.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, “youthful” citizens and youth movements had a part to play in these political events, as did an economic situation characterized by high youth unemployment, increasing costs of living, and poor quality of education. Although it is impossible to gauge with any precision what set of events, actions, and reactions propelled the revolts against longstanding regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, one arena that invites examination is that of higher education. Universities, students, and faculty have long held a central place in the political and socioeconomic development of the region. Thus, an examination of universities and higher education can be illuminating both for the events of the Arab Spring and the broader context in which they unfolded.

To this end, in this concept paper, I examine the changing role of universities in the Arab world over several decades as well as the significance of the university in the events of the Arab Spring, with particular attention to the case studies of Egypt and Tunisia. I begin with a brief historical overview of the role of universities in the development of the region in the contemporary age. University actors, particularly students, have been key protagonists in political movements in the twentieth century in the Middle East. Secondly, I consider the role of universities in the state-building projects of regimes in the region; in this regard, universities can be thought of as systems of patronage central to state-citizen social contracts as well as institutions critical of state-led development efforts. Thirdly, I consider how policies of privatization and neoliberalism have reconfigured the field of higher education and the role of the university as a sociopolitical institution in recent decades. This historical

context provides the basis for a closer examination of the years preceding the Arab Spring. Specifically, I discuss the status of higher education in terms of equity, governance, autonomy, and academic freedom leading to 2011. Then, drawing on research conducted by scholars in the region (under the sponsorship of the Social Science Research Council [SSRC] and with the support of the Ford Foundation), I examine the role of universities in the events of the Arab Spring as well as transformations within the university sector since 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt, in particular. Finally, the paper puts forth an agenda for new research trajectories in the field of higher education in the Arab world.

## **The Role of the University in the Arab World**

### *Universities as Centers of Political Activity*

Historically, universities in the Arab world have been important centers of political and social life. They constituted vital spaces for anticolonial movements and arenas for debates concerning the political and ideological character of newly emerging states. Students have been at the center of such activities and student activism—a central part of political life since the early 1900s. As in many parts of the so-called “third world,” student movements in the Arab world have been crucial to nationalist and anticolonial movements (Altbach 1989; for their importance in Egypt, see Abdalla 2008; Khan 2011; in Tunisia—Moore and Hochschild 1968; Natsis 2002). Student activism persisted in the postcolonial era, as young people were engaged in political struggles over who would rule and the shape that newly independent states would take. In a post-independence era, and with the rise of the authoritarian state, universities continued to be critical spaces for politics and opposition in a context of limited political freedoms.

In the 1930s, students formed political parties to espouse Arab nationalist ideas at a time when colonialism still reigned. As Noor Aiman Khan (2011) has shown, some of this nationalist political socialization also occurred in European cities where students from the colonies were studying; she charts, for instance, the political links between Egyptian and Indian nationalists that were built in the “university towns of Europe” (55).

In 1948, with the establishment of the state of Israel and the beginning of the Arab-Israeli War, university as well as high school students in Arab countries came out in protest. After the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai

Peninsula, and the Golan Heights in June 1967, students again rose up against their states for failing to protect Palestinian lands. After the 1967 defeat, protests were particularly prominent in Egypt and Lebanon (Abdalla 2008; B. Anderson 2011a, 2011b).

Prior to the 1950s, students focused primarily on broader political issues. They were mobilized by the political conditions around them and new and old parties. A sustained student movement—which voiced campus *as well as* political demands—coalesced in many contexts in the 1950s. For example, student protests in Iraq in 1952 began as a conflict between students and the dean of their faculty, but quickly grew and dovetailed with demands for national independence (Gorgas 2013). Ahmed Abdalla (2008) also points to the emergence of student-specific issues in the 1950s. According to historian Betty Anderson, even before that time, protesters “were still recognizably students when they went out into the streets. They thought of themselves that way and others saw them that way. They were students demanding political change because they felt they were qualified (because of their education) to have a voice.”<sup>3</sup> Even when students took up “campus issues,” their activism was still highly politicized and linked to parties and broader political struggles. Despite regular efforts by governments and university administrators to curtail or eliminate non-sanctioned political activities on campuses, and to “train” students to be loyal citizens, student activism has been a critical dimension of oppositional politics for over a century.

In the 1950s and 1960s, student protests were dominated by leftists and Arab nationalist sentiments and affiliations. However, Islamist student groups became a growing and powerful presence on campuses in the 1970s and 1980s. In Egypt, President Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat supported Islamist student groups on campus as a counterweight to the leftist movement, and they soon came to dominate student politics in the country (B. Anderson 2011b). In contrast, in Tunisia, after being allowed to function legally in the 1980s, the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGTE), associated with the Islamists, was heavily repressed in the early 1990s, and subsequently made illegal.

This discussion is by no means exhaustive. Student unions and protests have been significant in nearly every country in the region. For example, in Palestine, universities, students, and faculty were central actors during the first intifada, and like most Palestinian institutions continue to be embroiled in struggles against the Israeli occupation and for national independence (Abu-Lughod 2000; Baramki 1987; Johnson 1986).

### *Universities and State-Building*

Although universities in the region have always been sites of contentious politics, institutions of higher education have also been central to state-building projects and to economic development plans. In the early twentieth century fewer than ten universities existed in the region, but in the postcolonial era their number exploded.<sup>4</sup> This exponential growth has been heavily state-dominated; indeed, the expansion of the university sector has been central to state-building efforts because the goal was to train the technocrats and professionals who would help bring modernization to their countries. With the exception of Palestine and Lebanon, the university systems throughout the Arab world remained overwhelmingly public and state-dominated until the late 1980s and early 1990s when the region witnessed increased privatization of higher education.

The provision and expansion of education, along with the promise of jobs in the public sector has been a key pillar of the state contract with its citizens in the Middle East in the postcolonial era (L. Anderson 1987; Buckner and Saba 2010; Buckner 2011; Mazawi 2005). In Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, and beyond, a university education was a ticket to a secure public-sector job. State institutions in turn needed citizens with the skillsets necessary to staff state bureaucracies, provide public services, and participate in the state's development efforts. In line with these goals, policymakers and planners placed greater emphasis upon scientific specializations, engineering, and medicine to the detriment of the humanities and social sciences. Thus higher educational policies were envisioned with the goal of meeting the human capital needs of new states and the demand for skilled labor in the oil-producing countries.

Public universities have also constituted important systems of patronage and control, where obtaining appointments, promotions, and desirable positions has been closely correlated to towing the official line. State officials carefully monitored and directly controlled universities. The presence of security forces on campuses has been the norm in most cases, and faculty and students have had relatively little academic freedom. State intervention into university life and attempts to curtail political actions on campuses fit within the broader policy of promising security and development (education and jobs) in exchange for political freedoms.

### ***Growing Demand, Increased Cost, and Privatization***

The promise of an education, a job, and upward mobility became difficult to fulfill as early as the 1970s and became even more unattainable in the 1980s. With increasing debt levels and an economic downturn throughout the region, states were forced to implement structural adjustment policies, which placed limits upon public sector growth and salaries. In addition, with the expansion of education, more young people were clamoring to enter universities leading to overcrowding and a strain on resources. In countries like Egypt, the public system became severely overtaxed, with unmanageable class sizes, limited resources, and low salaries for faculty. In a move to decrease state outlays, hidden costs have been added to public education, a process that can be described as backdoor privatization through parallel admissions policies and programs. A major concern that this raises is the ways in which it can exacerbate inequality. Those hoping to attend a state university based on merit find fewer and fewer positions available because students with financial means have access to increasing number of places through parallel systems that enable them to enter university with lower grades (e.g., in Jordan, see Adely 2011) or by paying tuition for smaller and better resourced foreign-language tracks (e.g., in Egypt, see OECD 2010; Dessouky 2012).<sup>5</sup> Regimes in the region have responded to some of the heightened demand for postsecondary education by allowing the growth of private providers, which in some cases had been previously strictly limited.

Some of the most significant growth in higher education provision has been in the Arab Gulf states. Their initiatives have garnered much attention in the media and among education researchers, with Qatar's education city and its reliance on satellite campuses of Western universities receiving perhaps the most attention. Approaches to expanding higher education have varied (Miller-Idriss and Hanauer 2011). Satellite campuses have also been established in the United Arab Emirates, but Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has not adopted this model. Its approach, rather, has been to significantly expand the higher education sector and import foreign experts as faculty. A concomitant strategy has been to send Saudi students abroad for graduate study. The full implications of the importation of Western models of education wholesale have yet to be analyzed, although concerns have been raised about its effects upon local cultures and the weakening of Arabic language (Bashshur 2010) in schools

that use English as the language of instruction. These new universities may be redefining the role of education and universities altogether (Mazawi 2010), but policymakers and higher education administrators have yet to work through the possible ramifications.

The challenge of meeting the growing demand for university education has increasingly been coupled with concerns about quality. Universities in the region have regularly been characterized as failing to produce graduates who possess the skills necessary to get jobs in a global economy (Dhillon and Yousef 2009). This “skills mismatch” has dominated the literature about the youth crisis in the region, and increasingly frames and informs public policy debate about the role of higher education in the Arab world and around the globe. Indeed, these issues are not the purview solely of the “developing” world. In the United States, those for whom “utility” is measured in future wages regularly question the utility of fields such as the humanities.

In the Arab world, educational reform policies and projects in the past two decades have been dominated by an emphasis on the skills purportedly needed for this “new” economy—typically, technological skills and proficiency in English. “Critical thinking” and “problem-solving” are also cited as key abilities for economic success. However, as I discuss in the concluding section, without sufficient attention to issues of governance and academic freedom as well as inequality among students in their pre-university training, the characterization of postsecondary education as “skills mismatch” continues to oversimplify the challenges at hand.

### **Education, Universities, and the Arab Spring: The Cases of Egypt and Tunisia<sup>6</sup>**

It has become conventional wisdom that the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were at least in part generated by educated youth facing a bleak economic future. A common discourse about both countries has centered on the “failed promise” of higher education and the unmet expectations of youth. Indeed unemployment rates have been consistently high for university-educated young people in the region. Linked with political disenfranchisement as well as high levels of corruption in both countries, these conditions are part of what made the context ripe for revolution even if it is impossible to speak in such clear causal terms. Universities—and their students, faculty, and workers—are part and parcel of the broader economic and political realities that have contributed to the events since January 2011. For

the long run, the emergence of a new generation of private universities or provincial public universities is changing the face of the higher education sector in ways that may transform the political role of students, faculty, and universities. Indeed this process is already underway (for example, see Cantini 2012).

In what follows, I discuss the role of universities during the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, followed by a look at the current situation of the higher education sector and in light of the transitions taking place in each country.

### ***Role of the University in the 2010–2011 Revolutions: A Look at Egypt and Tunisia***

In Egypt and Tunisia, universities as institutions per se did not have a direct role. In both countries, universities and their administrations have been historically state-dominated institutions and as such their participation in the uprisings was never very likely. University actors engaged in protests, meetings, and advocacy as individuals or as members of unions and political parties, separate from any formal university affiliation. Nevertheless, universities have been critical institutions and spaces facilitating intellectual and political development in the years leading up to the revolutions.

#### Tunisia

In Tunisia, professors engaged in the revolt against the regime of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali most prominently as members of their union (Hussein Boujarra 2012). Tunisia has a long history of union activism dating back to the period of French colonization and, unlike Egypt, professors in Tunisia have their own union. The General Federation of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), the largest federation of unions, was established in 1924 (Omri 2013) and was heavily involved in the Tunisian national liberation effort. It continued to play a prominent role as a strong political opposition in Tunisia's history and has frequently been subject to state repression. As the Revolution began in 2010, the UGTT joined forces with those seeking to topple the regime (Toensing 2011). According to Omri, "The university has tended to be a training ground which prepared leaders to be active in UGTT once they leave education" (2013). Much like faculty members, students participated in the 2010–2011 revolt as individuals and as members of their student unions. The General Union of Tunisian

Students (established in 1952 and closely aligned with the UGTT) announced a student strike in January 2011 (Slama 2013).<sup>7</sup>

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University administrations themselves did not take a public stand or call for meetings or discussions on campus during the uprisings. Practically speaking, this was both an issue of *timing* and *geography*. Mid-year break had just begun and universities were empty. In terms of geography, Tunisian researchers have pointed out that the University of Tunis is fragmented with several of its campuses and academic centers located in various parts of the country. This is in part the legacy of the French university model as well as a deliberate policy of the old regime to create numerous small centers physically separated from each other. Thus, although universities employ permanent faculty, the geography of campuses have kept faculty somewhat dispersed, save for those actively involved in the union.

## Egypt

As in the case of Tunisia, universities in Egypt were initially not in session during the Revolution and university officials did not take a public stand or call for meetings or discussions on campus during the 2011 uprisings. However, many students were actively involved in the events leading up to the overthrow of the Mubarak regime. They participated as groups, at times under the banner of their university. Egyptian faculty members were also engaged in the protests as individuals. Some professors participated as members of the March 9th movement, established in 2004 to advocate for greater academic freedom (Dessouky 2012). On several occasions, March 9th organized protests coordinated with the University Professors for Reform, a group affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (Pratt 2012).

## ***Effects of the Political Transitions on Universities***

### Tunisia

Tunisian universities have witnessed some significant changes since 2011. Security forces no longer have a presence on campus and overall, one feels the possibility for greater freedom of expression there. However, universities also became sites of ideological struggles as more conservative elements of Tunisian society, who had previously been severely repressed by the regime, took advantage of the political opening to protest (sometimes violently) against activities on campuses that they found to be morally objectionable. Tunisian scholars and

activists have expressed concerns about the new kinds of attacks on academic freedom—attacks that, paradoxically, were actually facilitated by the Revolution and the newfound political freedoms.

Tensions were particularly high at Manouba University, which witnessed an ongoing struggle between a group of Salafi students and their supporters from outside the university and the administration (Daley 2012). Specifically, the conflict pitted the religious students against Habib Kazdaghi, the Dean of the Faculty of Letters, Arts, and Humanities. One of the primary sources of contention was the ban on wearing the *niqab* (full-face cover) on the university campus (Lindsey 2013). In December 2011, students staging a sit-in at the administration building denied the dean entry to his office, and the university eventually had to cancel classes in the hopes of diffusing the conflict. Conflicts also occurred in at least three other universities with incidents ranging from moral objections to curricular content, objections to the attire of female professors, and contention over the right of female students to wear the *niqab* (Human Rights Watch 2011).

Ideological struggles facilitated by the Revolution were not confined to university campuses. Concerns about the growing influence of Salafists and public anger and protest after the assassination in 2013 of two prominent political leaders by Islamic extremists, seemed to indicate a further deepening of political divisions among Tunisians. However, the political crisis was diffused when the ruling Ennahda Party agreed to step down in September 2013 and to hand over power to a caretaker government until a constitution has been adopted and new elections held. In January 2014, a constitution was voted by an overwhelming majority of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly; most significantly for the university sector, the new constitution includes an article that explicitly protects academic freedom (Makoni 2014).

Student unions continue to be active after the transition. Members of the Tunisian Student Union joined strikes called by the UGTT to protest the assassination of political leaders and the perceived unwillingness of the Ennahda government to address violence and extremism. The Union also continues to organize protests around student-related issues. For example, through the union, students protested the French LMD (license, master's, doctorate: 3-5-8) degree system, imported during the old regime in 2008 as part of Tunisia's efforts to implement the Bologna Process.<sup>8</sup> At a meeting of the SSRC working group on higher

education, Tunisian faculty similarly voiced concerns about this process and its implications for Tunisian universities. For example, they worried about the possibility of eliminating a number of fields of specialization and about control over the content of courses and programs.

## Egypt

When discussing post-revolutionary Egypt, one must speak of two phases. The initial phase took place immediately after the overthrow of the Mubarak regime and ended with the overthrow of the Morsi regime and the military takeover in July 2013. Since this coup, the situation within universities and the role of universities, students, and faculty in the ongoing political conflict has significantly shifted.

Between February 2011 and June 2013, Egyptian universities made significant gains toward more independent governance and autonomy. Security forces were no longer allowed on campuses (or at least their presence significantly decreased). For the first time in decades, free elections were held for student unions and for university administrative positions. Also, faculty and graduate students held several protests calling for better working conditions and reform of the university sector overall.

Student activism, severely repressed under Mubarak, emerged in full force. Egyptian researchers also reported a changed, freer, climate on campus, especially in terms of offering more and varied artistic and cultural activities. At the same time, several protests and strikes erupted on campuses, as students demanded that those who had been close to the regime be removed from their positions. A prolonged protest by students in the Media Department at Cairo University calling for the removal of the dean, who had been very close to the regime, came to a head when the dean called in the army who violently dispersed the protestors. Student protests also took place in the private American and German universities in Cairo.

Some faculty members heavily involved in the March 9th movement have continued to be active in party politics off-campus, in some cases running for election. For example, Mohamed Abu al-Gar, a professor at Cairo University who was one of the founders of March 9th, helped to found the Egyptian Social Democratic Party after the 2011 Revolution. As in Tunisia, some of this opening highlighted the degree of political polarization on campuses and in Egyptian society more generally (this, of course, reached a critical point in June 2013).

In many instances, newly instituted electoral processes kept the same people (university presidents and deans) in power (Lindsey 2011). On the other hand, some faculty and educators voiced concerns that the direct election of deans and the election of presidents by committees could too easily be sabotaged by political polarization and corruption (Lindsey 2013).

In a meeting with faculty and researchers held in Cairo in April 2013,<sup>9</sup> there was general agreement that little had changed in terms of the larger structures governing higher education in Egypt. A representative of the Ministry of Higher Education argued that ministry officials were interested in reform, but were themselves struggling with the daunting task of addressing bureaucratic inertia, and that many issues (including university budgets and other financial matters) were not in the hands of the Ministry of Education alone, but were divided between different ministries and offices with little coordination or collaboration between them. The ministry representative also pointed out that faculty were resisting reforms aimed at improving quality and accountability at universities, such as regular reporting about teaching and research activities. For their part, faculty viewed the ministry requirement of biannual reporting as an infringement on university autonomy (Mahmoud 2013).

Since the overthrow of the Morsi regime, Egypt's university campuses have been rocked by violent protests resulting in the arrest, injury, and even killing of students. Some of the most violent clashes unfolded in Cairo and al-Azhar universities where two students were killed in November 2013. The situation in Cairo University was so tumultuous that administrators had to end the Fall semester early. After the death of a student there in December 2013, administrators condemned security forces for using violent tactics on campus (Mansour 2013b). According to the Association of the Freedom of Thought and Expression, by the end of 2013 over 700 students have been arrested since the overthrow of Morsi.<sup>10</sup> Since the coup, at least seven students have been killed in campus violence (Lynch 2014). What initially began as protests of pro-Morsi students has grown to involve other students. The group Students against the Coup was formed as a coalition of several groups (Mansour 2013a). Faculty members have also come under siege. For example, Emad Shahin, professor at the American University in Cairo, was charged with espionage. The university

administration defended him, in another instance of university officials taking a stand against increased repression on campuses.

In response to the violence and political unrest in universities, the military government has promised greater power to security guards on campuses, thus raising fears that an important post-Revolution gain was being lost. In the words of Mohamed Abdel Salam, a researcher with the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression in Cairo:

For the first time since the January 25 Revolution, the confrontation between the military and the Brotherhood has jeopardized what little and newfound freedoms student movements gained following the revolution. (2013)

However, a number of university administrators and faculty supported this measure because of the serious disruption in teaching and learning (Lynch and Mahmoud 2013).

On December 2013, the Cairo Court for Urgent Matters ruled that students must receive permission from the university president before holding a protest on campus. The ruling states that university presidents have the power “to ban any activities that would lead to the sabotage of university priorities, threaten students’ lives and security within the campuses in general” (quoted in Lynch and Mahmoud 2014). Student activists and March 9th representatives expressed concern about this ruling and its implications for limiting freedom (Lynch and Mahmoud 2014). In January 2014, in a further deterioration of political liberties in universities, the minister of higher education announced that faculty who support on-campus protests would be charged under the Terrorism Law (Abdallah 2014).

## **Conclusions**

In the year after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, both countries saw important political openings—less interference of security forces, greater representation, and an overall campus environment of greater freedom of expression. In Tunisia, this also created new challenges to academic freedom as previously silenced religious groups tried to police activities on campus. In Egypt, students struggled to drive out symbols of the Mubarak regime.

Both countries faced major national crises as the newfound political freedom of the transition led to political polarization and conflict. In the Egyptian case, what was in part a popular movement to force Morsi to step down led to a military coup, the arrest, and killing of hundreds if not thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members, and increasingly severe

repression of any criticism of the military regime. In Tunisia, public anger at increasing violence and intimidation of Salafi groups led to major protests and a major political crisis. The ruling Ennahda party agreed to step down and hand power to a caretaker government, thus defusing the crisis. The image of violence in Egypt surely helped to inspire such a compromise. In January 2014, Tunisia passed a much-heralded new constitution with an overwhelming majority of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly voting in its favor. In contrast, the ongoing crisis and violence in Egypt has led to distinct losses in terms of academic freedom on university campuses.

In terms of the day-to-day management of universities, policy reform, and shortages of resources, more time is needed to see if any significant changes will result. The lack of stability during a period of challenging political transitions has made it difficult to implement and maintain reforms, as the case of Egypt showed. Briefly, some of the reform issues that have yet to be addressed include:

### ***Financial Transparency***

Throughout the region, financial transparency at universities, ministries of education, and in the public sector more broadly continues to pose a serious challenge to university autonomy and more equitable distribution of resources. This lack of transparency exists at multiple levels: allocation of public funds to universities, university and departmental budgets, and budgetary decision making. In most cases, neither faculty nor students participate in budget decision making. Ultimately, greater participation in decisions about resources is linked to issues of autonomy and governance.

### ***Resource Challenges***

Alongside the lack of financial transparency, many public universities in the region face significant shortages of resources, which impacts negatively the quality of education (el-Araby 2011). Cairo University, the largest public university in Egypt, is perhaps the clearest example of this, with severe overcrowding making it impossible for students in some departments to even attend lectures. An informal for-profit sector has emerged in the community surrounding the university to fill the gaps, with students paying for lecture notes and tutoring needed to pass exams without ever attending lectures (see Dessouky 2012).

As discussed above, universities grappling with severe resource issues have resorted to a number of tuition-generating programs such as offering degrees or majors in a foreign language for fees and allowing students who do not qualify academically to enter certain fields at a higher tuition rate. Typically referred to as “parallel” programs or systems,<sup>11</sup> they have been shown to have detrimental effects on equity (see Kanaan, al-Salamat, and Hanania 2011; OECD 2010).

### ***Pedagogical Reforms***

The realm of pedagogical reform and improved quality of education is perhaps the most challenging for a number of reasons. Quality is clearly linked to resource issues: overcrowding of classrooms, underpaid faculty, and the lack of sufficient materials and facilities such as books, laboratories, and technology all pose serious challenges. Questions of quality are also linked to governance and representation. When regimes have attempted to impose top-down reforms (e.g., as discussed above, the mandates of the Bologna Process in Tunisia or mandatory reporting for faculty in Egypt), such reforms have been met with resistance. In addition, without the bureaucratic and governance reforms needed to depoliticize decision making within universities, it will be difficult to build support for much-needed qualitative reforms.

### ***Autonomy of Universities***

Autonomy in the higher education sector refers to the ability of each university, as well as of the academic community as a whole, to protect academic rights including the freedom of speech, freedom to practice their professions with minimum interference, and to set their own agendas (for teaching, research, publication, et cetera). Historically, universities in the region have served as a system of patronage through which resources have been distributed to those who support the regime’s interests. In both Tunisia and Egypt this has been the case until the revolutions and it remains to be seen whether any significant changes will happen in this respect. Even if the political will exists, autonomy and independence from state interests and political interference will require a complete overhaul of administrative leadership and bureaucratic structures. These issues are also closely linked to governance, increased representation for faculty and students, and freedom of expression. As we have seen above,

in both Tunisia and Egypt, some initial gains have been made in terms of increased representation (and election of representatives) on campuses; however, Egyptian universities have already suffered major setbacks in this respect.

### **Universities in Crisis? A Research Agenda Moving Forward**

As should be apparent from the above discussion, a deeper understanding of issues and developments in higher education has implications that go beyond this sector and shed light on broader sociopolitical and economic concerns and transformations. However, much of the existing literature is dominated by a sectorial view or overly reductive assumptions about the links between higher education and economic development. The research on higher education in the Arab world has “largely disconnected our understanding of higher education governance from the broader cultural, social, political, and economic contexts within which higher education systems operate” (Mazawi 2005, 135).

This discourse of universities in crisis has gone international. Throughout the globe, policymakers, educators, and media pundits are engaged in debates about the nature and current state of higher education, its goals, and desired outcomes. In broad terms, debates have involved discussions on the increased demand for university education and concerns about quality, costs, and the underlying philosophy of the goals of this sector.

Much of the international discourse about universities in crisis is exclusively focused on economic outcomes, and particularly individual economic outcomes such as wages and employment. One exception is the preoccupation with building research and development capacities in the developing world as a means of promoting economic growth, innovation, and scientific discovery (see the reports produced by the Arab Human Development). Thus one is left to question whether universities as national resources, centers of intellectual, cultural, and political life are any longer relevant. Do policymakers, administrators, and even “consumers” of higher education envision any role for universities in promoting sociopolitical transformations in the Arab world or elsewhere?

In the Middle East, concerns about quality, costs, and meeting increased demand predominate. For at least two decades now, these concerns have been consistently linked to anxieties about a demographic “youth bulge,” high rates of unemployment, and the presumed links to political instability, if not outright violence. For many analysts the events of the Arab

Spring were proof positive that the intersection of a weak educational system, unemployment, and a youthful population were destabilizing factors.

The nature of the university in the region has changed and these processes have been underway for at least two decades now. Given the increasing privatization of higher education and the persistent economic challenges (made temporarily worse by the events of the Arab Spring), which leave a large swath of university degree-holders economically disenfranchised, do states invest in education merely for increased wage differentials and the hopes that innovation and entrepreneurship will flow from a more educated population? Do educators and educational policymakers still envision a university that will produce critical thinkers who might challenge economic policies and systems?

These questions are of particular relevance in the context of the current political upheavals in the region. Universities continue to be a focal point of street politics, particularly as other spaces of protest have been constrained, policed, and shut off (specifically in Egypt). However, the policies and programs that will shape higher education in years to come are yet to be seen. The next section addresses some of the trends that need further research and analysis in order to better understand the changes in higher education that are taking shape in the Arab world.

### ***Areas for Further Research***

Although the current context in countries where regime changes took place is still in great flux, leaving the implications of these political events unpredictable, some broader trends in higher education demand greater attention. Here I point to four such trends in terms of: academic and non-academic labor on university campuses, educational inequality, unemployment and social mobility, and academic freedom. I discuss each in turn briefly.

#### **Labor: A Changing Professorate**

In the course of SSRC's project on Arab universities (2009–2013), participating researchers pointed to a number of labor issues crucial for understanding developments in the higher education sector in the Arab world. By labor, I refer both to academic (i.e., the professoriate) and non-academic labor on campuses.

It is increasingly difficult to speak of the work status of academic staff. Reflecting the increased privatization and globalization of the higher education sector, the status of faculty, their ability to organize politically, and to express their views freely varies tremendously depending on the type of university and the job security that they enjoy. For example, new private universities, such as October 6 in Egypt, rely almost entirely on faculty with short-term contracts, which has important implications in terms of governance, academic freedom, and rights to political association on and around campus (Cantini 2012). Scholars from Lebanon also highlighted faculty's temporary or part-time status; André Mazawi (2003) has charted similar processes in his study of faculty at universities in the Gulf. The economics of new academic labor also emerged as a concern in research on both Egypt and Tunisia.

The greater reliance of universities on contract or part-time faculty is a global trend. The American Association of University Professors reports that in 2011 41% of academic jobs in the United States were part time.<sup>12</sup> In an edited volume on academia around the globe, Philip Altbach (2003) argues that the academic profession as we have come to know it in the West—with a system of tenure guaranteeing some degree of academic freedom—either is being eroded or never really existed in many parts of the world. Analytically speaking, trends in the nature of academic jobs and the relationship between faculties and universities raise new issues with respect to academic freedom, governance, autonomy, and equity. It also highlights the need for more research that considers questions of access and equity among academic workers within and across universities.

Another significant development in the arena of labor on campuses in recent years has been laborers' (specifically non-academic staff) self-organizing for better working conditions. In at least one case, at AUC, this involved alliance with student groups (Galal 2012). The situation of adjuncts and non-academic labor reminds us that issues of labor rights, job security, and decent wages will remain a significant factors in the future of universities.

### Growing Inequalities

The university (and access to higher education) has long been used as a resource by the state, both as an economic/development tool and a political one. In this regard it is important to map the “distribution” of this resource across the national landscape, especially in terms of

the differences between metropolitan and provincial locations. The key question here concerns metropolitan/provincial inequalities, which have been considered an important triggering factor of the Arab Spring, especially in Tunisia (Boujarra 2012), and the role of higher education in improving or exacerbating such inequalities. In Egypt, Ragui Assaad and Caroline Krafft (2011) have found that geography and wealth are among the strongest variables shaping prospects for university entry.<sup>13</sup> Although inequalities map differently in the different countries, researchers increasingly point to inequality of access along geographic and socioeconomic lines throughout the region (Acedo 2011). Being poor and rural has the strongest effect on educational outcomes and, specifically, the likelihood that one will get to university and actually graduate. Although gender is not the strongest predictor of access to higher education in and of itself, being female exacerbates the negative effects of poverty and geography (on Morocco, see Bougroum and Ibourk 2011; on Jordan, see Kanaan, Al-Salamat, and Hanania 2011; and on Syria, see Kabbani and Salloum 2011).

Increasingly, researchers point to evidence that inequality in access to higher education is strongly linked to inequality in public secondary education and to the structures that track students along particular trajectories. The K-12 experience (strongly correlated with socioeconomic status) continues to be the strongest determinant of who gets access to higher education. Poor quality education at the lower levels also determines which fields students from lower socioeconomic groups can pursue if they manage to get to postsecondary institutions because of a tightly tracked academic system in most countries. Much more research is needed on educational inequality and the pathways to university as well as to what students are able to accomplish even if they make it to university. Researchers in Egypt have contributed to our knowledge of how inequality limits opportunities across (or up and down) educational systems (Assaad 2010; Assaad and Krafft 2011; Elgeziri and Langsten 2010). In Egypt, and increasingly in other parts of the region, dependence on private tutoring also benefits those with more financial resources (e.g., Sobhy 2012).

Concerns about high rates of unemployment among university graduates in the region persist. Although high unemployment is typically explained with reference to the quality of university education and the choice of majors, employability after graduation is also a function of class, geography, and resources. For example, majors are largely determined by results from the *thanaweya amma* (exam at the end of secondary school) in Egypt, and the

results in turn are linked to the quality of secondary education and the resources available to pay for tutoring. In addition, students with financial means can buy their way into certain specializations, through the parallel public systems, as is the case in Jordan (Adely 2011). Similarly, at Cairo University students can pay higher tuition to enroll into parallel foreign-language tracks with smaller classes and better resources (Dessouky 2012).

#### Youth, Education, Unemployment, and Social Mobility

Another area of investigation pertains to life after graduation of university students. The majority of research in this vein is quantitative, providing a broad view of some basic demographic trends in the region among youth with a particular attention to trends in education and employment, gender differentials, and economic inequality. This research both contributes to the view of youth and education in crisis and seeks to address this crisis by promoting data-based policy recommendations.

In addition, a number of attitudinal surveys have been conducted with groups of youth in the region, often university students, in an attempt to gauge their attitudes and perspectives on a range of political, cultural, and social issues. Absent from this research and analysis is more rigorous intranational data that disaggregates youth by class, geography, and a host of other factors (one exception is the work of the economist Ragui Assaad and his colleagues in Egypt) and data that tracks youth over time. Even thinner is the on-the-ground ethnographic and qualitative research needed to capture the interplay of multiple factors—geographic, political, and economic—shaping the possibilities and perceptions of young people in the region as they embark upon adulthood.

#### Universities, Political Transitions, Governance, and Autonomy

A set of interesting questions on democratization, governance, and academic freedom is prompted by the focus on the political transitions and conflicts that have unfolded with the events of the Arab Spring. Can universities be sites that promote political liberalization and free intellectual production and critique in a context of constrained civil liberties? What are other means of engaging faculty and students and, more broadly, democratizing university spaces? Is increased participation in university governance a way to do this?<sup>14</sup> Do elections and direct representation in university administration promote greater academic freedom?

Can such processes work if the broader political context continues to be repressive? Can critical thinking be promoted in an atmosphere of limited academic freedom? These questions have been raised by academics and media pundits in the United States, concerned about satellite campuses of American universities in the Arab Gulf countries and the limits on academic freedom there; others have retorted that these campuses will promote greater academic freedom in the region.

How does the growth in the private sector provision of higher education affect the role of the university in society? Do private universities provide a space for greater academic freedom or do they work to limit the role of universities in the broader social and political life of surrounding communities and states? What are the implications of increased reliance on part-time or short-term academic labor for educational autonomy? How will challenges of equity and equal access to higher education shape developments in higher education in the Arab world? Will universities become accessible to everyone?

Clearly, the answers to these questions will vary depending on the history, type, and size of private universities. In the region, we find a few private universities with a long history of relatively representative governance. Newer institutions, such as October 6, provide little space for faculty or student governance (Cantini 2012). The fate of higher education, its governance, autonomy, and academic freedoms is in many aspects the subject of ongoing struggle. However, persistent economic pressures and neoliberal policies are gradually remaking the shape and political import of universities. This transformation may prove to have both opportune and deleterious effects.

## Notes

1. The research for this study was completed in the fall of 2013, and the paper does not account for events that happened after that time.

2. The focus on youth is not new. For at least two decades, policymakers, scholars, and international agencies have been preoccupied by the overwhelming youth of Arab populations—or what has been termed the “youth bulge,” youth crisis or, even, youth “time bomb” (for a critical treatment of this concern with Arab/Muslim youth, see Bayat and Herrera 2010; Khalaf and Khalaf 2011).

3. Personal communication with Dr. Betty Anderson.

4. One online source, the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, puts their number at nearly 800: <http://www.webometrics.info/en/node/54> (accessed January 12, 2015).

5. In fact, the sorting begins much earlier in the schooling system where great degrees of variability in educational quality already limit the prospects of admission into public education for children from lower socioeconomic groups. This will be discussed in the section on inequality at the end of this paper.

6. Much of this section draws on the research and insights of a group of scholars in Egypt and Tunisia who participated in a SSCR program entitled University Governance and Autonomy in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education in the Arab World, funded by the Ford Foundation. The first phase of their research concluded in January 2011, just as the Arab Spring was unfolding, and country teams in Tunisia and Egypt agreed to continue their research on the same set of issues in the post–Revolution era.

7. The other major student union is the General Union of the Students of Tunisia, which is closely aligned with Islamists parties and has been banned and severely repressed in recent decades.

8. The Bologna Process designates the effort by members of the European Union, as well as those in the Euro-Mediterranean region like Tunisia, to standardize higher education through compatible or transferable degree and credit systems. It is named after the city where European education ministers signed the first agreement in 1999.

9. This was the final meeting of SSRC’s Universities and the Arab Spring project.

10. In one high-profile case from November 2013, twelve al-Azhar students were tried, convicted, and sentenced to seventeen years in prison for their attempts to storm the university headquarters (see Mansour 2013).

11. The growth of the private sector has been another mechanism implemented to meet the increased demand for higher education (for more information on privatization of higher education, see Akkari 2010; Buckner 2013a; Coffman 2003; Farag 2000; Jansen 2006; Miller-Idriss and Hanauer 2011; Sanyal 1998).

12. See the Association’s report at: <http://www.aaup.org/file/2012-13Economic-Status-Report.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2015).

13. Geography impacts in particular female students.

14. This question has often been posed in the context of school education: Can one teach democratic values if schools and classrooms are not organized democratically?

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