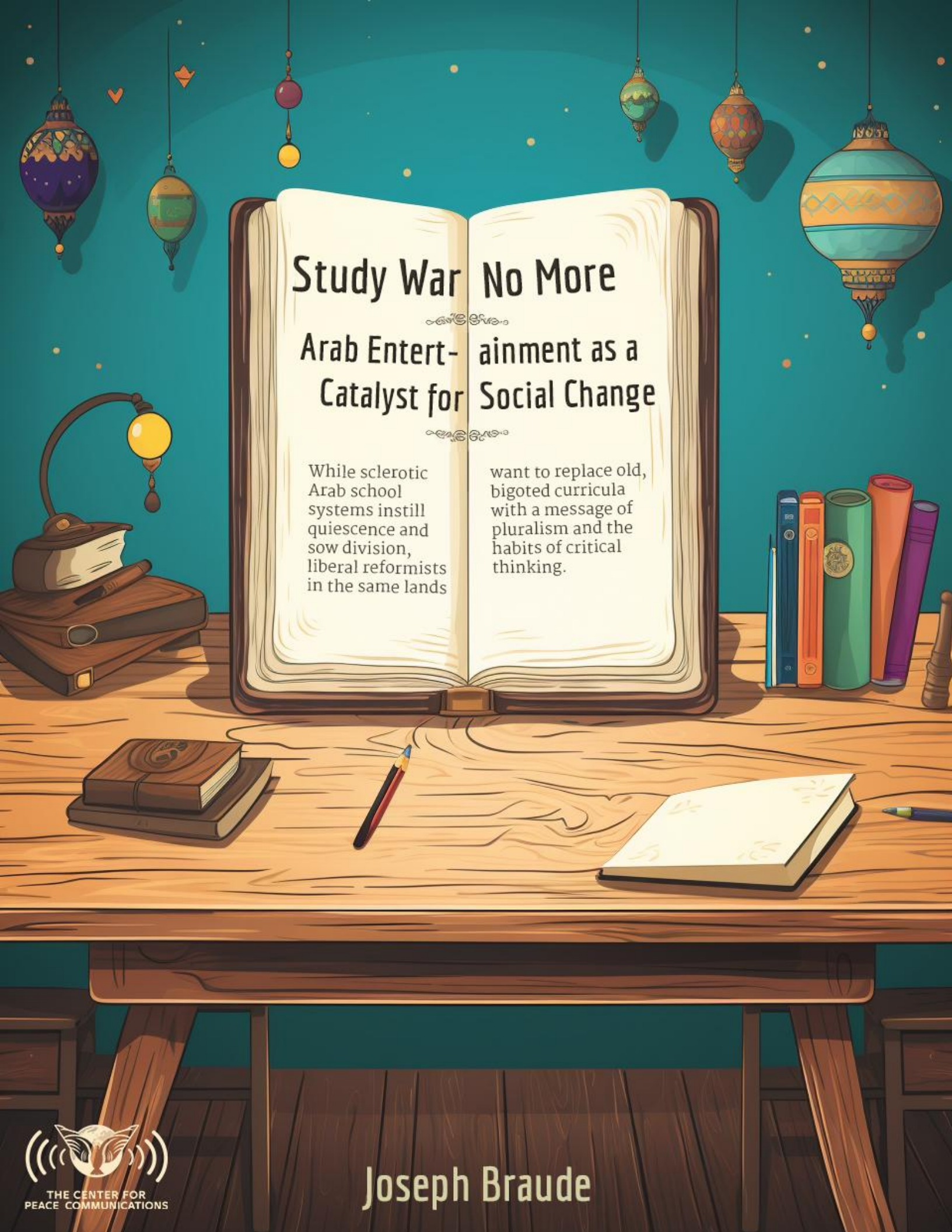
Study War No More
Arab Entert- ainment as a
Catalyst for Social Change
While sclerotic Arab school systems instill quiescence and sow division, liberal reformists in the same lands want to replace old, bigoted curricula with a message of pluralism and the habits of critical thinking.
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Executive Summary

From North Africa to the Gulf, Arab educational reformists share the aspiration to overcome legacies of authoritarian pedagogy — that is, generations of rote learning that instilled quiescence and sowed division. Liberals' agenda calls for teaching children the high-level skills of analysis, evaluation, and critical thinking, as well as replacing old, bigoted curricula with a message of pluralism and coexistence. Since the 1990s, national school systems in some of the largest Arab countries proved resistant to successive efforts at such reform. As a result, reform-minded establishment figures in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and elsewhere created nongovernment initiatives aiming to begin to improve the caliber of teaching more indirectly, through pilot partnerships with government schools. Maverick educational entrepreneurs, meanwhile, created online platforms designed to circumvent the public school system and reach young Arab learners directly. These efforts, while promising, remain diffuse, and some of the most creative efforts to catalyze reform have not garnered Arab establishment support.

In 2020, the U.S.-brokered Arab-Israeli "Abraham Accords" opened the possibility of a new departure in Arab education reform, at least with respect to the three Arab countries that joined the framework in signing treaties with Israel. Among these, in support of a "peace between peoples," the UAE has already revised curricula about Jews and Israel and moved to broker partnerships with Israeli educational institutions. In doing so, it has paved the way for Israeli education specialists who have spent decades monitoring Arab textbook content to engage their Arab counterparts programmatically for the first time.

Whereas some Arab establishments have been moving toward liberal education reform, others, such as Algeria, have responded to the pressure of domestic unrest by introducing new, counterrevolutionary education programs that double down on militaristic pedagogy. In doing so, they have also moved to suppress liberalizing trends. Yet in Iraq, liberals have

dared to challenge the chauvinist messaging of Iranian Shi'ite militias by publishing new, humanistic textbooks about Iraq's multi-denominational past.

The conspicuous involvement of a U.S. citizen in one of the boldest Iraqi educational reform initiatives in recent memory reflects the potential of American civil society to help bridge gaps in connectivity among the region's educators. On a civil level, Americans can spread the tools and techniques of their country's own liberal education reform initiatives in consort with Arab liberals. They can support and empower the most promising independent Arab ventures, and broker new relationships between them and U.S.-allied Arab establishments. They can also play a bridge-building role in helping to connect Israeli voices to Arab reformists beyond the circle of "Abraham Accords" states, working together to overcome generations of Arab pedagogy rooted in the use of Israel, its people, and Jews generally as a foil.

The priorities of national development differ between war-torn Arab countries seeking a semblance of stability and stabler ones attempting to grow an economy. All of them, however, face the same essential challenge in the realm of education: prepare a diverse, youthful population to play an active role in fostering a pluralistic, civil society. To do so, they must overcome a legacy of authoritarian pedagogy which aimed to do the opposite: instill quiescence and sow division. The challenge is further complicated by the fact that numerous would-be agents of Arab school reform, as in any part of the world, are themselves a product of the old system.

A 2018 monograph by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ably describes this predicament. It observes that for generations, Arab states construed education as a service to be consumed uncritically by the population, rather than a partnership, for the sake of building knowledge, between educators and their society. In exchange for the opportunity

to learn by rote and acquire baseline cognitive skills, Arab students effectively forwent the higher-level skills of analysis, evaluation, and critical thinking, as autocrats had deemed them dangerous to teach. Denied these benefits, learners more passively accepted official facts, formulated and imposed by government bodies, about their national history and religious identity. Teachers and textbooks inculcated the tropes of scapegoating and blame deflection, a belief in the false unity of militarism, and discomfort with explorations of diversity within the population.[1] They manufactured a black-and-white worldview of villains and victims — in which a Jewish or Israeli conspiracy to enslave the world lay behind problems large and small, ordinary people were powerless to stop it, and only the ruler could save the day.

To provide an archetypal example, Iraqis who experienced the rule of Saddam Hussein recall that schoolchildren used to gather weekly around a flagpole, wearing blue-gray uniforms, while a teacher clutching a megaphone led the following call-and-response: "Our President?" "Saddam Hussein!" "Our slogan?" "One Arab nation with an eternal message!" "Our goals?" "Unity! Freedom! Socialism!" A youngster with a semiautomatic rifle would then fire a round of blanks over the heads of his classmates.[2] The same children consumed picture books drawn from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* and learned to sing the following anthem of Nasserist pan-Arabism: "We heed your call, o flag of Arabism / All of us come to your defense. / We heed your call, o flag of Arabism / and let us make of our skulls a ladder to your glory."[3]

[1] Marwan Muasher and Nathan J. Brown, "Engaging Society to Reform Arab Education: From Schooling to Learning", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* August 2018, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3ftu3vq
[2] Interview with Omar Dewachi (graduate student of Medical Anthropology, Harvard University), November 2002
[3] The song "We heed your call, O flag of Arabism" (Labbayk ya 'Alam al-'Uruba) was penned and first performed by Egyptian songwriter Muhammad Salman in 1956, to rally Egyptian troops during the Suez war. However, it became a mainstay of public performances 25 years later, at the onset of the Iran-Iraq war. Over the course of that conflict, the song aired frequently on Iraqi television, juxtaposed with images of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi troops, and Iraqi fighter planes.

"Generations were raised on such philosophies," recalls Saad Salloum, the professor at Mustansiriya University in Baghdad who leads the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue. "Meanwhile, we were denied the opportunity to meaningfully examine our own society. Through the ideology of pan-Arabism we learned more about Algerians, Tunisians, and Egyptians than we did about Iraqi Christians, Yazidis and Jews. The external 'other' was our bogeyman, while the internal 'other' was, at best, a mystery."[4] Having purged the humanities and social sciences of their essential analytical tools, moreover, Arab school systems assigned them a lowly status. They meanwhile exalted education in technology and the sciences, which the state had deemed useful and non-threatening. But Arab students, lacking the requisite rearing in methodical inquiry or deliberative discourse, too often strained to engage these technical fields creatively.[5]

The denial of intellectual autonomy to generations of Arabs not only failed as a national development strategy; it also ricocheted back on Arab rulers. When jihadist and other opponents of the state crafted their own educational plans to attract and brainwash followers, they exploited the same vulnerability to manipulation which Arab government schools had instilled. They accessed the same ingrained tropes of scapegoating and blame deflection, moreover, to serve new ideological goals. Witness the plagiarism in this anthem of the Muslim Brotherhood and its armed splinter groups, dating from the 1990s: "We heed your call o Islam of heroism / All of us come to your defense. We heed your call o Islam of heroism / And let us make of our skulls a ladder to your glory." Substituting only the phrase "Islam of heroism" for "flag of Arabism," the song easily refracted the old militant directive onto a new set of targets, including Arab governments and the ethos of secularism.[6] As some Arab leaders meanwhile moved to moderate their policies toward Israel, or establish

[4] Interview with Saad Salloum (President of the Masarat Institute for Cultural and Media Development), June 2020
[5] Marwan Muasher and Nathan J. Brown, "Engaging Society to Reform Arab Education", *Ibid.*
[6] Ahmed al-Baz. "Sariqat al-Ta'rikh: Kayfa Tamma Tazyif Labbayk Alam al-Uruba li-Tusbih Labbayk Islam al-Butula? [Theft of History: How Did 'We Heed Your Call o Flag of Arabism' Become 'We Heed Your Call o Islam of Courage'?] *Ru'yah*, July 30, 2015.

relations with the Jewish state, the rejectionist worldview they had instilled for generations enabled their opponents to tar them as traitors.

Fast-forward to Tunisia under Islamist rule in 2014. As ISIS drew local youth by the thousands to join its fighters in Syria and Iraq, Latifa, a secular Tunisian vocalist with a pan-Arab following, lamented the region's devolution from the optimism of the Arab Spring to the darkness of civil war. In hopes of inspiring a solution to the problem by rekindling a feeling of Arab unity, she reached back into the region's cultural legacy to make a new recording. What she found was the same old song: her new performance of "We heed your call" with the original "flag of Arabism" reinstated won millions of views on social media.[7]

Would Latifa's "ladder of skulls" serve to mend fractured societies, let alone inspire a constructive nation-building agenda? The question is relevant to the field of education reform because that same year, in several states where the ruler survived the Arab Spring, schools took steps analogous to the Tunisian singer's revival of a Nasserist anthem — by introducing new counterrevolutionary education programs that doubled down on the false unity of militarism. In neighboring Algeria, for example, the country's armed forces launched a national chain of secondary schools called the "School of the Cubs of the Nation" (Madrasat Ashbal al-Ummah).[8] An official documentary about the venture said it aimed to instill the values of "patriotism, Arabism, and national defense." The video shows school children discussing the need to neutralize foreign threats, and refers to international conspiracies to destroy the country. In one scene, a teacher writes, "The French Campaign Against Algeria" on a chalkboard.[9] Critics have assessed the "School of the Cubs of the Nation" as an effort to turn young people into informers and enforcers for the

[7] Iman al-Humud (Broadcaster, Radio Monte Carlo) in discussion with the author in Paris, June 13, 2014.
[8] Algérie en Videos. "Tadshin Madrasa Ashbal al-Ummah bi Bishar [The Inauguration of the 'Cubs of the Nation' School in Bechar]." YouTube video, 2:23. November 13, 2013, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-qPNpYgmGU.
[9] Lyes kassa lyes. "Madrasat Ashbal al-Umma bi 'l-Bulaydah 2014 [The 'Cubs of the Nation' School in Bulayda 2014]." YouTube video, 17:03. March 28, 2014, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVuAh4Iku8Y.

junta — comparing it to Nashi, Russia's Kremlin-backed youth movement, established in 2008 to protect Russia from being "governed externally."[10]

As a case in point, the Algerian venture should raise questions about longstanding international efforts to help improve the region's schools, most of which channel aid and assistance through Arab Ministries of Education. Recall from the previous chapter's treatment of a liberal protest movement in Algeria that some elements within the country do not embrace the dark narration of foreign or domestic affairs that the "School of the Cubs of the Nation" seeks to implant. To the contrary, tens of thousands of demonstrators have acknowledged the historical mistreatment of Algerian Amazigh, extended a hand in friendship to outsiders, and called for genuine civil rule. In other words, a critical mass of young people have apparently come to feel that the militant messaging and rote learning of their school days did not suit them, and formed an alternative, liberal worldview independently. This promising shift does not negate the possibility that millions of Algerians cherish the jingoistic tropes of their schooldays, or that many more embrace the crude Islamist analogue to them. It does suggest, however, that some of the Algerians best suited to wage a campaign of liberal education reform may not work for the government schools system — or that those reformists who do, lack sufficient influence within their institution to effect change.

A winning international strategy to support Arab education reform, therefore, would not only help reformists gain ground within the state system; it would also empower educators in the broader population who seek to play a role without waiting for the system to reform itself. As the examples to follow will show, remarkable people in several Arab countries have innovated techniques to bypass government schools in imparting advanced skills to their fellow citizens. They want to grow their efforts, as well as make common cause with like-minded establishment elements, but could use some help.

[10] Iman al-Humud (Broadcaster, Radio Monte Carlo) in discussion with the author in Paris, June 13, 2014. Tom Whipple. "Disturbing Echo of Youth Group that Lauds Putin." *The Times,* December 9, 2006.

Renegade Educators for Critical Thinking

Among the range of independent education initiatives, one cluster of activity revolves around the aspiration to spread critical thinking. Proponents of this skill set feel that Arab societies can apply critical thinking to negotiate their internal differences, marginalize extremist groups, foster national reconciliation, and, in so doing, grow more stable, secure, and prosperous. So argued Omar El-Enezi, a 23-year-old medical student at King Abdelaziz University in the Saudi port city of Jedda when we first met in 2013. "When people talk to each other here," he said, "too often they make arguments based on logical fallacies, impossible to resolve. It's detrimental to the country to leave them that way."[11] In his view, an "ignorant movement" advanced by state-backed clerics, media, and schoolteachers has effectively suppressed the use of logic and reason. He said he aimed to counter this movement by popularizing critical thinking and the scientific method, and instilling a fascination with the many branches of science and technology which these techniques have enabled. Enezi and three friends had recently launched a project aiming to do so: an online media platform called Asfar ("zeroes") named after the world-altering numeral invented in ancient Babylon. Through audio, video, and prose, Asfar conveyed ideas about logic and science in humorous, Saudi-inflected Arabic, tailored to the sensibilities of its audience.[12]

Enezi came to critical thinking intuitively, he recalled, as a ten-year-old in 2001. Some prominent Saudi clerics had issued a religious edict against Pokémon children's games and playing cards, alleging that the franchise promoted "Zionism." "Everybody was throwing away their Pokémon toys," he said. "I had a lot of those cards and didn't understand why I had to give them up." He went online and researched the meaning of the purportedly subversive names and symbols on the cards. He found all the cards to be benign, he said,

[11] Interview with Omar al-Enezi (co-founder, Asfar online community) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, April 3, 2014.
[12] Asfar [YouTube channel]. https://www.youtube.com/user/a9farchannel, accessed January 10, 2021

and decided to hold onto his collection. “But I noticed that a lot of my friends didn’t think the way I did,” he added, “and so I kept my head down—for years.”

Saudis who share Enezi’s inclination to challenge orthodoxy tend to gravitate to the sciences, Enezi explained, and they gain courage to express their views by discovering that they are not alone. Only after Enezi entered the department of medicine at King Abdelaziz University in 2011 did he begin to speak more openly about his ideas, in the company of peers. Asfar was an outgrowth of his friendships with Baraa Orabi, a computer engineering student minoring in philosophy; Rakan al-Mas’udi, a self-described “humanist and enthusiast of equality” born in Syria and studying in Jedda; and Mohammad Al-Hamrani, a medical intern and amateur musician. All fluent in English, mainly from their study of the language at home (Enezi, for example, has never visited an English-speaking country), the young men supplemented their studies with online American university courses about secular reasoning and the latest research in their fields, and established an informal weekly salon to discuss what they learned. From essays by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, they discovered Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution. They found a website, yourlogicalfallacyis.com, that gave them a framework to perceive patterns of conversation in Saudi Arabia that seemed to stifle public discourse.[13] And by listening intently to comedian Joe Rogan’s weekly online radio show, they learned about what makes a podcast entertaining. Then they bought a microphone and set up a makeshift recording studio with echo-absorbing fabric.

A typical Asfar podcast, from Valentine’s Day 2014, is called “The Biography of Love: Attraction and Human Psychology.”[14] The four co-hosts talk through an online lecture by Yale University president Peter Salovey that examines the theory of the “love triangle”:

[13] “Your Logical Fallacy is”, https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com/, accessed July 13, 2020.
[14] Asfar. “Sirat al-Hubb: Al-I’jab wa ‘Ulum al-Nafs [The Story of Love: Attraction and Psychology].” Podcast via Soundcloud, 1:03:26. February 6, 2014. http://www.a9far.net/love-attraction-and-human-psychology/.

intimacy, passion, and commitment.[15] Hamrani points out that though love is experienced by the brain, "It's not the same as a headache," in that it cannot be explained in strictly chemical-neurological terms. "The difficulty of explaining love begins with a problem of language," Enezi says. "In English there are distinctions between 'I like you,' 'I love you,' and 'I'm in love with you.' In Arabic we have distinctions of our own." Riffing on Enezi, Hamrani points out that love between two people plays a different role in an individualistic culture such as Salovey's than in a traditional society like Saudi Arabia, in which "larger groups, like families and clans, are more deeply vested in a couple's relationship." Later the discussion segues from Salovey's lecture to books the group has read, like Gerald Schoenewolf's The Art of Hating. Mas'udi points out that love and hate are not polar opposites but rather twins in intensity, equidistant from apathy. Sounding a note of optimism, he adds, "You might be surprised to see hate very easily turning into love."[16]

These productions, Enezi said, "are intended for a more patient and sophisticated audience." For browsers with a shorter attention span, Asfar's cartoons on YouTube offered a three-minute educational fix. Take "Critical Thinking" (Al-Tafkir al-Naqdi). It is an animated cartoon illustrating philosopher Daniel Dennett's "Seven Tools for Critical Thinking," with an eighth added by the Asfar team as well as adjustments tailored for the Saudi audience.[17] Other cartoons explain the scientific method and topics ranging from the theory of evolution to Pluto's demotion from planetary status. The cartoons are tightly scripted, with a soundtrack, crisp animation, frugal use of text, and several laugh lines per minute; they speak to the group's passion for science and reason.

[15] Professor Peter Salovey, "Lecture 9 - Evolution, Emotion, and Reason: Love (Guest Lecture by Professor Peter Salovey)." *Open Yale Courses*, Yale University, March 2007, accessed online: https://oyc.yale.edu/psychology/psyc-110/lecture-9

[16] Professor Paul Bloom, "Lecture 10 - Evolution, Emotion, and Reason: Evolution and Rationality." *Open Yale Courses*, Yale University, March 2007, accessed online: https://oyc.yale.edu/psychology/psyc-110/lecture-10

[17] Joseph Braude "Saudi youth for scientific reasoning, civil discourse." YouTube video, 8:15. posted November 13, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0ahyo4xw-E

Such efforts have at times faced pushback, however, from other elements within the society that forthrightly oppose critical thinking. Witness Palestinian Salafi cleric Murid al-Kallab, who produced a four-part series called "Skills of Thought: Critical Thinking" which was disseminated via the popular YouTube channel "IslamAcademy," funded by clerical elites in the kingdom. After presenting a crude definition of critical thinking, Kallab says,

> The candle of critical thinking must be extinguished, and its light must be turned off, when it contradicts a proof text from the Qur'an or prophetic Hadith. In this situation, there is no place for critical thinking. We must simply believe and surrender. If not, I would be violating logic. . . . In this situation, logic says that God's wisdom cannot be understood by humankind . . . [and] you don't have the right to choose what of God's wisdom to apply or not apply.[18]

This perspective was the definition of Salafi orthodoxy, in a country where clerics had long wielded overwhelming power to enforce it. When we spoke, Enezi pointed significantly to the case of poet and journalist Raif Badawi, who faced a prison sentence in 2011 after posting a series of tweets that allegedly insulted the prophet Muhammad. In May 2014, having lost a court appeal, he was sentenced to ten years in prison, a thousand lashes, and a fine of a million Saudi riyals (roughly $267,000).[19]

Asfar, a tiny, all-volunteer operation with only a few thousand fans, took pains to avoid provoking the ire of the Saudi religious establishment. "We're proceeding cautiously, keeping it light, and avoiding confrontation," Enezi explained. The group studiously avoided presenting scientific perspectives on God, and never commented about politics. Enezi recalled,

[18] IslamAcademy2012, "Maharat at-Tafkir (1) Muqaddimah Hawl al-Tafkir, Dr. Murid al-Kallab [Thought Skills 2: Critical Thinking, by Dr. Murid al-Kallab]," YouTube video, 52:11, posted March 18, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ie5jDGxWT2c.
[19] Interview with Enezi; "'Saudi Liberals' website founder sentenced to 10 years jail, thousand lashes", *Reuters,* May 7, 2014, accessed online: https://reut.rs/3gVphr5

> There was one series of episodes we were frantically cautious about making, which was the three-episode series on evolution—because by discussing evolution you are immediately throwing out the idea of a 'Design.' When we launched the episodes we were really worried about a negative backlash from the community. But we only got a few—you know, two or three—confused comments, and the rest of them were actually excited about the topic. Some of them said, 'We never knew this before. Thank you very much.' So the community, currently, is a lot more enlightened than we thought.[20]

Though Asfar was just a drop in an ocean of Islamist media productions, it was not alone in advancing its core ideas. Another modest operation, "Scientific Saudi," subtitled American video shorts about science without comment.[21] An anonymous Facebook page created in Saudi Arabia, "I believe in Science," was a forum for Arabic-language discussion of the world's latest discoveries.[22] A handful of individual enthusiasts, like Riyadh's Khalid al-Judi', have also videotaped themselves expostulating on the merits of critical thinking and posted the clips to YouTube. While some of these youths have established contact with one another, others produced the content without encouragement or support, and said they felt intellectually isolated.[23]

Under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, policies shifted with regard to clerical hegemony over the public space in a manner that initially seemed to augur well for efforts like Asfar.[24] But the concurrent stifling of nongovernmental civil initiatives by liberals appears instead to have caused a chill effect on the little community of independent

[20] Interview with Omar al-Enezi (co-founder, Asfar online community) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, April 3, 2014.
[21] "Scientific Saudi", *Facebook page,* founded July 29, 2012, accessed online: https://www.facebook.com/ScientificSaudi
[22] "Ana Usadiq al-Ilm [I believe in Science", *Facebook page*, founded September 14, 2011, accessed online: https://www.facebook.com/IbelieveInSci/
[23] Al-Judi', Khalid. "Dawrat Maharat at-Tafkir al-Naqid al-Dars al-Awwal [The Role of Critical Thinking as a Skill, Lesson 1]," YouTube video, 14:24, posted March 16, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kf1vwmoQRDY.
[24] Bilal Y. Saab, "Can Mohamed bin Salman Reshape Saudi Arabia?", *Foreign Affairs,* January 5, 2017, accessed online: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2017-01-05/can-mohamed-bin-salman-reshape-saudi-arabia

proponents of critical thinking. Asfar, for example, has produced no videos or podcasts since 2017.

More aggressive Arab efforts along the lines of Asfar emerged in Egypt, where a number of ventures similarly aimed to address the failure of public schools to teach critical thinking, by reaching the population directly through various media. A 30-episode TV series called "School of Mischief Makers" [Madrasat al-Mushaghibin], which aired on the national satellite channel ONTV in 2014, features a classroom of cheeky students, of both faiths and hailing from all parts of the country, enduring a lecture by their aging, strait-laced teacher.[25] Over the course of each episode, it emerges that the teens and not the teacher harbor the reactionary views, having passively absorbed it in their childhoods. In one episode, he shows them that their arguments escalate into brawls because they fail to reason empathically with each other. In another, he makes the case that one learns by questioning and challenging the teacher, and might even teach the teacher something along the way — then applies the principle to their experience with Islamic education at the hands of clerics. Discussing Egypt's Coptic population, he challenges the students' presumption that their Christianity makes them less Egyptian, explaining that, to the contrary, Islam is Egypt's newcomer.[26]

Albert Shafik, who served as ONTV's Deputy General Manager when the program aired, said the network had been striving to fill a gap in the public school system. "Our government schools employ hundreds of thousands of teachers whose own education was overwhelmingly rote learning," he observed.

[25] Though the series itself has since been removed by ONTV, a sample episode can be seen here: "Madrassat al-Mushaghibin Ibrahim Issa Tarikh al-Khilafah al-Islamiyyah [School of Mischief Makers - Ibrahim Issa - History of the Islamic Caliphate]", uploaded August 7, 2019 by YouTube user "lost on youtube", accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lTrgMAhAG4

[26] Hisham Muhammad, "Sa'id Saleh... Talmidh Madrasat al-Mushaghabin [Sa'id Saleh: A Student of the School of Mischief Makers]", *aljarida*, April 24, 2020, accessed online: https://www.aljarida.com/articles/1587656596886920300/

> It's foolish to expect that they would suddenly be able to switch on a light and teach critical thinking, a skill which many of them do not possess. But in the meantime, we have 20 million youngsters learning from them, and we need to introduce something new into this cycle. So we felt that if we put a fictional model teacher in front of a mass audience, he could serve as a kind of educational proxy, both to students and to teachers. Perhaps some teachers would screen episodes from the show in their classes, for example. And indeed, we were heartened to learn that many teachers did that. They really want to help the kids, and when an opportunity comes along to spread a message more effectively, they seize upon it.[27]

In a separate, more expansive effort, an Egyptian social entrepreneur built a dedicated educational organization that aimed to reach millions of Egyptians online, as well as begin to change the government school system from within. In 2012, Egyptian internet activist Wael Ghonim, widely touted as a prime mover in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, donated revenues from his bestselling memoir to create a media foundation for the production of online learning videos. Tahrir Academy aimed to combat "the deteriorating state of Egyptian culture [caused by a] mind-numbing educational system based on rote memorization." With support from a production team in Cairo, volunteer lecturers posted 600 videos to YouTube, garnering over 20 million views. In one example of Tahrir's attempt to promote the alternative to rote learning, an 11-part lecture series explained the meaning of critical thinking and, ever so gently, its social and political implications. People who lack critical-thinking skills "think only they are right" and "find conspiracies in everything in life," explained host Islam Hussein. Embrace critical thinking, he said, and "your mind will be yours alone. . . . No one will be able to easily control you, or manipulate you to serve his goals. . . . It will effect every aspect of your life: personal, social, political. . . . [Critical thinking] will also be your defense against any distorted news spread by the media." The process of adopting critical thinking begins with self-criticism, he added: "Look into the

[27] Interview with Albert Shafik (Managing Director, ONTV television network) in Cairo, July 10, 2014.

mirror. Set aside your racial, political, and social identities and try to view things in an unbiased way."[28]

Tahrir's staff appreciated the difficulty of bringing such lessons to government schools, where most teachers were themselves the product of rote learning. But the video series offered a burst of public exposure to the concept, and some teachers, having discovered it spontaneously, shared it with their students. The NGO meanwhile sought to build inroads into the government education system. In April 2014, Tahrir Academy welcomed Dr. Farouq al-Baz to join its board of directors. As brother of the late Osama el-Baz, longtime senior advisor to former president Hosni Mubarak, he offered the possibility of access to stalwarts of the military-led government. The organization hoped that el-Baz could win establishment buy-in for Tahrir to begin to play a role in reforming schools curricula and retraining teachers. At a media event in Cairo, he heartily endorsed Tahrir Academy, dubbing the group "an ambitious, patriotic project. … The energy and zeal of the Academy's young volunteers is enough to show that a better future lies ahead for Egypt." He predicted that the group would become "influential within a short few years." This all-Egyptian effort did not attempt to enlist Egypt's foreign allies in advocating for it through consultations with the country's leadership, for fear of drawing suspicions or triggering pushback. But critics of the project within the educational establishment tarred it as a "Zionist plot" anyway, and the bottom-up lobbying did not garner high-level political support. After funding dried up, Tahrir Academy scaled back its efforts. It posted no new videos between 2015 and 2020.[29]

In sum, Asfar, Tahrir Academy, and other independent ventures reflected the presence of highly motivated social entrepreneurs who aim to remake Arab education, as well as pent-up demand for the content they create. But they did not muster the practical assistance or political support that would have been necessary to sustain them, let alone integrate the programs into their respective national education systems.

[28] Interview with Islam Hussein (MIT virology researcher; lecturer, Tahrir Academy) in Cairo, July 19, 2014.
[29] *YouTube*, "Tahrir Academy [*Akadimiyyat at-Tahrir*]", uploaded May 11, 2011, accessed September 22, 2018: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCV_CVB7S7pWC_khhcyvGxwg

The Limits of Systemic Education Reform

A larger set of reform initiatives are those that emanate from within Arab education ministries — or launch semi-independently, with establishment support, for the expressed purpose of improving the system. These efforts reflect different, at times contradictory views about the role of Arab society as a partner with the government in educating youth. They also speak to uncertainty as to how to deal with entrenched hardline elements that oppose liberal reform.

By way of example, in 1990s Egypt, as the state struggled against a jihadist insurgency, education ministry officials recognized that the fighters' followers included government school teachers who sought to radicalize and recruit youth within the classroom. Egyptian education minister Hussein Kamal Bahaa El Din, who held the post from 1991 to 2004, adopted a policy of transferring them from Egypt's major cities to the country's southern and border governorates. Unsurprisingly, less than a generation later, the areas to which they had been sent proved to be the most supportive of Islamists in successive elections — and a stronghold of resistance to later attempts by the Sisi government to weaken extremist religious messaging in mosques and seminaries. Bahaa El Din had clearly appreciated that his ministry had a problem, but his attempts to mitigate it proved counterproductive. His 13 years in charge of education had meanwhile seen no methodical strategy to revise the values or skill sets Egyptians were trained to teach.[30] Doing so would have been enormously difficult, to be sure: the country's vast education ministry, starved for resources, harbors at least as many feuding fiefdoms and dysfunctional bureaucracies as any other school system. Nor, after all, did the country's ruler necessarily support the kind of reforms that would have sharpened the population's capacity to deliberate critically and act autonomously.

[30] Samuel Tadros, "Promoting Tolerance in Egyptian Education", unpublished presentation at Al-Mesbar conference "Incremental Reform in Arab Societies: Regional Challenges, Global Alliances", November 2013

The United Arab Emirates, a much smaller autocracy, made its own early efforts to mitigate Islamist influence in schools as well as develop the beginnings of an alternative. Years before it commenced an all-out crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the government undertook a series of personnel adjustments to weaken the movement's ability to sway the population. In 2003, according to local newspaper reports, authorities moved 170 Brotherhood figures employed by the Ministry of Education, including 83 who held managerial roles, to various local divisions of government where they would control no platform of public messaging. (An equivalent reshuffling of mosques and media occurred in subsequent years.)[31] While the government did not move to replace these figures with proponents of a liberal education, it did take steps to inculcate an alternative set of values. Witness the educational division of the "Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness," a project of the UAE Ministry of Interior initiated in 2011 which partnered with the education ministry. Its elementary schools curricula, introduced nationally, taught millions of schoolchildren to regard the legal system as the supreme framework for their actions — superseding tribal, political, and ideological loyalties. On the one hand, the "rule of law" as defined by the Bureau did not meet the standards of democratic governance: the curricula did not suggest, for example, that the population should have the right to amend the laws. In other words, it effectively promoted the principle of "rule by law," whereby the legal system serves the autocrat as an instrument by which to govern. Nonetheless, the project represented a step forward, in that children learned to embrace a transcendent civic ethos of religious, ethnic, and gender equality under the law.[32]

Despite such encouraging signs, Arab government school systems across the broader region continued to manifest deep resistance to change. In response, some Arab establishment reformists have supported the creation of nongovernmental initiatives that

[31] "Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun Fil-Imarat al-Tamaddud wal-Inhisar [The Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE, expanding and contracting]," Al-Mesbar, Sept. 16, 2013, https://bit.ly/2NDmmoB (accessed 9/18/18).
[32] Broadcasting Change, "The Culture of Lawfulness Project." *YouTube*, Dec 13, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtNF_x4kO9E&feature=emb_title

would aim to improve the caliber of teaching in government schools through partnership. The Arab Thought Forum, a private endowment launched by Saudi prince Khalid bin Faisal, supported one such venture called TAMAM (an Arabic acronym for "schools-based development"), a regional NGO headquartered in Beirut and led by American University of Beirut education professor Rima Karami-Akkary. The group defines a successful Arab education as "revolv[ing] around constructive citizenship," and holds that every student "should become an agent of change; a continuous and reflective learner; an innovative and critical thinker; and a promoter of ethical social responsibility … [toward] a more tolerant, equitable, and just society." Karami-Akkary believes "the above cannot be achieved under the existing Arab educational systems," but that by forging a "learning ecosystem" that binds schools to NGOs, institutions of higher education, and parents' groups, a holistic effort can meaningfully enrich the student's experience.[33] TAMAM seeks to catalyze such efforts by embedding personnel within an Arab school and building "leadership teams" of educators, parents, and students. The teams work together to identify obstacles to an outstanding civic education; lobby for and implement improvements; and monitor results. TAMAM brokered relationships with a small network of government and private schools in Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, and Sudan.[34]

On the one hand, Tamam's deployments to Arab education systems were scattered and diffuse, and most participating schools served relatively affluent, cosmopolitan communities that had already made the crucial decision to seek help in pursuing a citizenship-centered learning model. Even in Saudi Arabia, where the organization's patron served briefly as education minister, TAMAM's practices were not institutionalized on a large scale. Nor in any of the schools where it operates has a TAMAM venture directly challenged hardline elements in an education ministry that oppose the evolution toward civics-based education. On the other hand, relative to its small size, the group's outcomes

[33] Marwan Muasher and Nathan J. Brown, "Engaging Society to Reform Arab Education", *Ibid.*
[34] "Al-Tatwir al-Mustanid Ilal-Madrassah [School-Based Development] - Participating countries", *TAMAM website*, accessed online: https://tamamproject.org/

have been substantial. Using social media, moreover, TAMAM has distributed video clips that movingly document the success of a given school's pilot project for other Arab schools to consider and emulate. Discussions of the material on Facebook, for example, suggest that the concepts and practices are spreading.[35]

In building relationships with school systems in numerous Arab countries, TAMAM claims authenticity as an indigenously conceived and funded organization, backed by a Saudi prince. Other nongovernment initiatives with roots outside the Arab region have also built inroads to Arab education ministries. Among recent examples, the Life Skills and Citizenship Education Initiative (LSCE) is an educational model launched through the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF) in 2017 to spread "a holistic, lifelong, and rights-based approach to education in the Middle East and North Africa."[36] Offering a framework to enrich learning through school, the workplace, and communal life, it espouses 12 core "life skills," in four thematic categories. "Learning to Know" (the cognitive dimension) covers creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving. "Learning to do," aiming to boost employability, features lessons in cooperation, negotiation, and decision-making. "Learning to be," a module to build autonomy, teaches resilience, self-management, and communication. Finally, "learning to live together" — the foundation of citizenship — inculcates respect for diversity, empathy, and participation.[37] LSCE emerged amid the massive waves of refugees and internal displacement wrought by post-Arab Spring civil wars. Through partnerships with NGOs, international lending institutions, and foundations,

[35] "Haifa Co-education School Bir Hasan LB", *Facebook page,* founded December 6, 2014, accessed online: https://www.facebook.com/Haifa-Co-education-School-Bir-Hasan-LB-381228098702434/?fref=mentions&__tn__=K-R

[36] "UNICEF MENA Life Skills and Citizenship Education - Conceptual and Programmatic Framework", *Harvard Graduate School of Education website,* date not given, accessed online: http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/frameworks/47

[37] "Life Skills Citizenship Education - Middle East and North Africa", *Association for the Development of Education in Africa website,* date not given, accessed online: http://www.adeanet.org/youth-skills-forum/sites/default/files/jeannette_vogelaar.pdf

it has catalyzed small pilot projects among Arab education ministries in Djibouti, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, and Yemen.[38]

As UNICEF offers a framework to impart advanced skills and egalitarian values for a diverse society, other UN bodies have served to voice concern about the incendiary texts and teachings that impede such progress. In 1995, UNESCO member states ratified the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, which calls for "respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human" and "accepting the fact that human beings, naturally diverse in their appearance, situation, speech, behaviour and values, have the right to live in peace and to be as they are."[39] This statement followed the Education clause of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples; and other internationally endorsed UN declarations in affirming educational principles for all member states to follow. Though lacking an accountability mechanism to ensure that the signatories comply, the statements have at least articulated a global standard for teaching about the "Other," and provided a set of criteria on which to evaluate textbooks and teaching systems.

For educational reformers across the region, the availability of such criteria naturally begged the question of what steps could be taken to encourage, persuade, or pressure Arab governments to implement them. The 25 years since the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance had seen the promise of independent Arab initiatives like Tahrir Academy and Asfar, the emergence of reformist establishment-backed NGOs like Tamam, and some evidence of internal reform within education ministries. Yet in sum, as a new generation of children passed through the crucible of Arab schools, in most Arab countries, overall progress toward improving their education remained far from adequate.

[38] "UNICEF MENA Life Skills and Citizenship Education", Ibid.

[39] "Declaration of Principles on Tolerance", *UNESCO website,* November 16, 1995, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3h7UNSV

Israeli-Arab Educational Partnerships

Israel, the country and polity most widely reviled by Arab textbooks and teachers, has harbored its own kinds of expertise in the field of Arab education. The earliest and most underutilized kind was the institutional memory that arrived by way of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. On the eve of the Second World War, 900,000 indigenous Jews still lived in their ancestral homelands across the Middle East and North Africa. A professional class, their numbers included a substantial number of schoolteachers and administrators. Jewish populations fled the Arab region en masse, primarily to Israel between 1947 and 1974.[40] The dynamics of Arab-Israeli conflict precluded the possibility that the educators among them would reconnect, over the decades that followed, with the school systems of the countries they had fled: most Arab governments imposed a blanket ban on Israeli-Arab civil engagement of any kind, and well into the twentieth century, even Israel's Egyptian and Jordanian peace partners effectively maintained it. Meanwhile, as demonizing portrayals of Jews, their faith, and their nascent state held center stage in Arab schools, media, and mosques, the Jews who had actually lived alongside Arabs, now gone, faded from local memory.[41]

A later form of Israeli expertise in Arab education developed out of national concern that antisemitic and anti-Israel canards in Arab schools fueled social and political animosity toward the country and its people and sharpened the case for terrorism. Israeli researchers knew that some Arab voices, appearing on Arab satellite television, decried antisemitism and incitement in the region's schools as injurious to their own societies.[42] But as Israelis

[40] Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1998)
[41] Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes to Israel* (New York: Israel Universities Press, 1972)
[42] "Former Dean of Islamic Law at Qatar University: Our Culture Is Responsible for Terrorism," *MEMRI*, July 22, 2004, accessed online: https://www.memri.org/tv/formerdean-islamic-law-qatar-university-our-culture-responsible-terrorism/transcript (accessed 9/25/18)

were blocked by Arab governments from engaging Arab civic actors directly, the idea of making common cause with such figures in a campaign for education reform was a nonstarter. Seeking a different route to press for change, several Israeli education scholars began to raise international awareness of the phenomenon of hate speech in Arab schools. They hoped in doing so to raise the political price to Arab governments for perpetuating hate-filled curricula, and thereby prompt improvements.[43]

Prominent among these efforts, the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), which launched in Jerusalem in 1998, acquired and examined textbooks and curricula from Arab countries to determine whether they met "international standards on peace and tolerance as derived from UNESCO declarations and resolutions." The organization pledged to assess "whether young people are being educated to accept others — be it their neighbors, minorities and even their nation's enemies, and to solve conflicts through negotiation and compromise while rejecting hatred and violence."[44] IMPACT-se's reports indeed exposed flagrant violations of the UNESCO standards, and triggered an international outcry. As a result, the European Parliament froze some of its funding to the Palestinian Authority in 2018 pending improvements to the latter's school curricula. The Swiss, German, and British governments demanded clarification from Palestinian officials before committing to a renewal of support.[45] In the U.S. Congress in 2019, lawmakers introduced a bill that would require the Secretary of State to submit annual reports reviewing the educational material used by Palestinian Authority and UNRWA schools in Palestinian territories, after finding that "new Palestinian curriculums fail to meet the international standards of peace and tolerance in educational materials established by UNESCO."[46]

[43] Interview with Marcus Sheff (CEO of IMPACT-se) on July 7, 2020
[44] "Reports — IMPACT-se", *IMPACT-se website,* date not listed, accessed online: http://www.impact-se.org/reports
[45] Lahav Harkov, "European Parliament committee votes to freeze €15M to PA over inciting textbooks", *Jerusalem Post,* September 27, 2018, accessed online: https://bit.ly/30fGkgG
[46] Omri Nahmias, "House Committee passes Peace and Tolerance in Palestinian Education Act", *Jerusalem Post,* December 19, 2019, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3j3tKK1

It bears noting that IMPACT-se surveys of Arab textbooks were not limited to the Palestinian areas: the group's reports also covered Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia, as well as non-Arab Muslim-majority countries Iran and Turkey and, for that matter, orthodox Jewish school systems in Israel.[47] The fact that Western legislative action arose only with respect to Palestinian textbooks reflects American and European governments' outsize role in underwriting the Palestinian Authority and, by consequence, the role of their legislatures as a site for the airing of disputes among advocates of Palestinian and Israeli causes. But IMPACT-se's influence on Western policy toward Arab education systems well exceeded the litter of bills and parliamentary inquiries which its reporting catalyzed directly. As part of a larger movement of research institutions dedicated to exposing antisemitism and other bigotry in Arabic discourse, the group helped advance the issue in Western policy discussions of the Middle East generally. A generation after IMPACT-se's founding, the problem of "incitement in Arab schools" is now routinely raised by Western lawmakers and diplomats in high-level meetings with Arab allies, and informs continuing inquiries by the U.S. State Department and European foreign ministries in explorations of civil development across the region.[48] So substantial pressure has been applied. But to the extent it aimed to cause actual reform in Arab schools, has it succeeded?

Beginning in 2015, a series of actions by Arab governments indeed signaled the beginnings of a departure from their history of demonizing Jews, Judaism, and Israel. IMPACT-se noted that the 2015-'16 school year in Egypt saw the removal of some antisemitic religious textbooks from circulation, and the release of a new high school geography book acknowledging that peace with the Jewish state had enabled "the promotion of economic and social development and the repair of [Egypt's] infrastructure."[49] Though the book

[47] "Reports — IMPACT-se", *IMPACT-se website,* date not listed, accessed online: http://www.impact-se.org/reports
[48] Interview with Dennis Ross (counselor and senior fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), August 2018
[49] Ofir Winter, "Egypt Enhances its Peace Education, One Step at a Time", *IMPACT-se website*, March 3, 2016, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3j25p7D

maintained the bogus claim that the 1956 and 1967 wars stemmed from an Israeli aspiration to expand "from the Nile to the Euphrates," it inserted the iconic, humanizing photo of Israeli Prime Minister Begin and Egyptian President Sadat clasping hands together with President Jimmy Carter.[50] Additionally, the public rededication of long-dormant synagogues in Manama and Alexandria, and the construction of new ones in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, amounted to highly public expressions of tolerance by the governments of Egypt, the UAE, and Bahrain which constituted a further contribution to public education, albeit not through schools.[51] The same could be said of recurring public expressions of acknowledgment and empathy with victims of the Holocaust by Ibrahim Al Issa, head of the Saudi Muslim World League, following generations of Holocaust denial by that institution — and subsequent reforms of the Saudi school system, also praised by IMPACT-se.[52] These expressions of acceptance and shared humanity were commonly ascribed to the regional realignment that placed Israel in a de facto camp with Sunni Arab powers against Iranian and jihadist forces. Within that strategic context, Arab powers understandably began to mitigate longstanding Jewish and Israeli grievances. Inasmuch as IMPACT-se had served to articulate the grievances about Arab education, it arguably helped inform the new cultural agenda that Arab states began to pursue.

By the same token, however, the limits of these reforms to a handful of Arab countries reflect the limitations of an Israeli inquiry into Arab textbooks that did not — and could not — involve a collaborative exchange with the Arab educators who used them. In any society, the pivotal role teachers play in interpreting the textbooks, using the curricula, and serving as a role model to students overall matters at least as much as the texts themselves. Thus a

[50] Ben Lynfield, "New Textbook Bodes Well for Egypt-Israeli Relations," Jerusalem Post, May 19, 2016, accessed online: https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/New-TextbookBodes-Well-for-Egypt-Israeli-Relations-454413
[51] "Egypt unveils historic Alexandria synagogue after three-year renovation", *Times of Israel,* January 10, 2020, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3j2NBcm; "UAE's first official synagogue to be complete by 2022", *DW News,* date not given, accessed online: https://bit.ly/32lkN9d; Raphael Aharen, "Behind the scenes of the first morning minyan in Manama in over 70 years", *Times of Israel,* June 28, 2019, accessed online: https://bit.ly/30bSo2B
[52] Robert Satloff, "A Historic Holocaust Awareness Awakening in Saudi Arabia, of All Places," New York Daily News, Jan. 26, 2018, accessed online: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-historic-holocaust-awareness-awakening-insaudi-arabia-of-all-places

strategy to reform education that does not include professional development and new standards for the teachers will not succeed. Similarly, the "hardware" of critical thinking, empathic reasoning, participatory learning, and analysis provides learners with skills they require to evaluate the "software" of political narration, historical memory, and spiritual instruction. It is of course good news when, as the post-2015 period has shown, some Arab school systems are retiring antisemitic "software" and replacing it with a more humanistic alternative. But subtle improvements to a textbook require a higher level of cognitive engagement in order to register with students — which in turn requires a willing, well-prepared cadre of teachers. A new kind of teamwork will be necessary to bridge "hardware" and "software" solutions and reform Arab education holistically, from teachers to textbooks.

To begin to imagine what such a partnership would look like, consider the mutual gaps between the Israeli activity noted above and the Arab reform initiatives described previously. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia's Asfar and Egypt's Tahrir Academy produced creative, compelling content to spread critical thinking education online, but shied away from overtly applying critical thinking skills to the controversies that raged in their societies. These independent actors judged it perilous to make such waves without establishment political backing, and their attempts to garner such support did not succeed. On the other hand, Israel's IMPACT-se, while well disposed to sympathize with their agenda, could not engage these actors, due to Israel's strained relations with the two countries (a cold peace with Egypt, that is, and no official relations with Saudi Arabia quite yet). IMPACT-se could apply international pressure against the chauvinist strand in Arab education systems, which both Israel and Arab liberals opposed. But public pressure on its own is a blunt device, best applied in coordination with private partnerships to develop an alternative to the objectionable material. The constraints IMPACT-se faced in offering such partnership stemmed from Israel's isolation from Arab societies and, by consequence, from the group's necessarily narrow focus on monitoring the content of textbooks from a distance.

In any case, neither independent Arab ventures like Asfar and Tahrir Academy nor an Israeli group like IMPACT-se would be able to contribute meaningfully to the reform of Arab school systems without the courage and commitment of Arab establishments. To his credit, as noted earlier, Egyptian Education Ministr Hussein Kamal Bahaa al-Din manifested an awareness of his institutions' failings. Nor was he alone in the region in recognizing the need for transformative change. As the Algerian example shows, however, some state educators favor a retrenchment of authoritarian pedagogy. Meanwhile, Bahaa al-Din's reform policies amounted at most to nibbling around the edges of the problem. It remained to be seen, moreover, whether private initiatives like TAMAM, itself a demonstrably confrontation-averse venture, would open their doors to the participation of independent Arab actors, let alone proponents of humanist treatments of the Jewish or Israeli "other."

With the signing of new peace accords between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco in 2020, opportunities to do so grew considerably. The UAE leadership signaled from the outset that it aimed to move past the "cold peace" outcome of Egypt's and Jordan's pacts with Israel and foster a genuine "peace between peoples." In a swift signal of intent, less than one month after the agreement's signing in August, the UAE's Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence and Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science signed the first public memorandum of understanding between Israeli and Gulf educational institutions.[53] While other agreements followed among the two countries' universities, UAE elementary and secondary schools began to inculcate support for the principle of peace with Israel, as well as awareness of the region's indigenous Jewish history, in their respective curricula.[54] Marcus Sheff, the founder of IMPACT-se, wrote in the *Times of Israel* that the new openings across the Arab world

[53] "UAE's Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence and Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science sign first of its kind MoU to collaborate on AI research". *PR Newswire*, September 13, 2020, accessed online:: http://prn.to/39hy3gQ (accessed January 11, 2021).
[54] Yossi Lempkowicz, "Just 2 weeks after the UAE-Israel accord, Emirati textbook teaching about the peace treaty is on the desks of schoolchildren," *European Jewish Press*, September 14, 2020: http://bit.ly/3nAh1Qa, accessed January 11, 2021.

> present the opportunity to engage with curriculum developers in the region. … What is required is professional and culturally sensitive curriculum research, the understanding of where problems lie, cooperation with partners, the willingness to teach alternative content and the authority to drive change — and to build a more tolerant and better future for our region.[55]

Sheff had discovered a new world of possibility.[56] Meanwhile, although the field of engagement for an Israeli educational NGO had expanded to only a few new Arab states, liberal reformists in other Arab countries emerged around the same time to show that they too wanted to advance along the same lines. In July 2020, for example, the Iraqi Institute for Diversity Studies — a subsidiary project of the NGO Masarat, profiled in chapter one — published a first-ever series of textbooks on the country's non-Muslim minority faiths, including Mandaeanism, Yazidism, Judaism, and Christianity. Geared toward clerics, media, and teachers, the textbooks aim to better inform Iraqis who in turn educate children and the general public. "The idea is to prevent the preferential treatment of one particular religion as the 'best' or the 'dominant' faith over others and actively work against the introduction of religious monopolies," explained Masarat head Saad Salloum. Khalil Jundi, author of the volume on Yazidism and a Yazidi himself, said he felt the project had the potential to "liberate the minds of young generations." The Institute tapped American Rabbi Ephraim Gabbai, who is the child of Iraqi Jewish refugees, to pen the book on Judaism, and invited this author, also an American of Iraqi Jewish background, to join an advisory board that would help devise the strategic rollout of the project. This grassroots venture received the endorsement of the newly elected Minister of Culture and Antiquities, Hassan Nadhem — a first step in a long process of lobbying for its adoption by the country's Ministry of Education.[57]

[55] Marcus Sheff, "An Opportunity to Change the Cycle of Hate," *The Times of Israel*, December 20, 2020: http://bit.ly/2XvWvpg, accessed January 11, 2021.
[56] Marcus Sheff (founder, IMPACT-se), in discussion with the author, January 11, 2021.
[57] Gilgamesh Nabeel, "A Diversity Institute Teaches Iraqi Students About Religious Minorities," *Al-Fanar Media,* June 29, 2020, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3h0QecJ

The presence of an American rabbi in an Iraqi educational reform initiative reflects the relevance of American civil society as a vector in overcoming gaps in connectivity which most of the region's education systems have not yet bridged. Equipped with the human network and knowledge of the field which American expeditionary diplomacy can provide, the United States can vitally contribute to the ongoing struggle for Arab schools reform. American educators can forge partnerships that strengthen the capacity of independent Arab ventures aiming to spread high-level analytical skills and corrective social narration among their populations. They can build new inroads to Arab education ministries and the semi-independent NGOs that serve them, to more granularly assess the state of reform efforts and become a voice in discussions of their future. They can also play a bridge-building role in helping to connect Israeli voices to Arab reformists beyond the circle of "Abraham Accords" states, as the latter work together to overcome generations of Arab pedagogy rooted in the use of Israel and its people as a foil. As these civil partnerships develop, U.S. officials and lawmakers can more judiciously exert their influence to win on Arab governments to open a space for the most promising schools reform ventures to take shape. By empowering the youngest generation to think critically, embrace diversity and the "other," and apply their creative powers to the range of fields, Americans can help secure the region's future.