



## Event Summary – The Politics of Education in the Arab World: Past Legacies, Current Challenges

The Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies  
March 23-24, 2006

### Summary

On Thursday, March 23, 2006, IRIS staff attended a symposium at The Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies entitled, “The Politics of Education in the Arab World: Past Legacies, Current Challenges.”

Speakers at this event presented working papers on their topics of interest dealing with the delivery of an imperative service, education, in the Arab World. Underlying the general consensus about the powerful role of education in addressing state needs, much insight was to be gained about what types of reforms would be palatable to the area in question, the Arab World. Whether viewing education as a humanitarian response from an aid perspective or a tool with which to colonize and re-acculturate a civilization, the underlying message of all papers presented was clear:

***1. Pedagogical attempts at cultural purity in any aid endeavor and especially those dealing with education are costly and bear and foster unexpected consequences and inefficiencies, and***

***2. Modern educational efforts to administer present systems of education in the Arab World cannot negate Islam and traditional Arab cultural systems, as the populace has not forgotten and will not forget, its Classical Islamic philosophy of a morally-informed education.***

### Presentations:

**The Reform of Islamic Education in Contemporary Egypt: The Case of the “Modernization” of al-Azhar**

**The “Moral” Conquest: Education and Civilizational Ideology in Colonial Algeria**

**Education, Gender, and Cross Cultural Experiences with Reference to Elite Arab Women**

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## The Reform of Islamic Education in Contemporary Egypt: The Case of the “Modernization” of al-Azhar

**Malika Zeghal**

**Associate Professor, Divinity School, University of Chicago**

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Dr. Zeghal’s presentation begins with a discussion of religious institutions in the Muslim world in a post 9/11 climate, focusing specifically on how the Ulama, religious officials, transmit religious knowledge and how the religious aspect of education in the Muslim/Arab World is good and necessary. She then launches into a discussion of al-Azhar, sex-segregated religious schools in Egypt today.

The institution of al-Azhar, Zeghal says, provides a buffer between radical Islam and Islam as expressed by the state, absorbing elements of both and transmitting what is good and appropriate. Al-Azhar, Zeghal continues, builds a public Islam maintained by the Ulama who have been institutionalized within the Egyptian state and sometimes given ministerial rank. Most importantly, al-Azhar administers a demand for education with 1.3 million students.

Zeghal next informs us of President Nasser’s role in promoting the institution and proliferating the tradition of al-Azhar. Nasser, Zeghal notes, was an instrumental proponent for al-Azhar, transforming the state transmission of religious knowledge by choosing to enlarge and control the role of Islam. This resulted in the re-awakening of institutions like al-Azhar, institutionalized under the auspices of modernization. Such integration was a fundamental element of his pan-Arabism as institutionalized Islam gave Egypt Islamic legitimacy.

However, though al-Azhar remains a powerful educational force in contemporary Egypt, an enduring relic of its Islamic educational tradition, and though it has diversified its curriculum to include secular subjects, the nature of a madrasa, a religious school, is one designed to train its students in Islamic law and philosophy. Thus, despite extensive reforms, the quality of the secular sciences taught at al-Azhar is often questioned.

In short, Dr. Zeghal’s presentation provides much insight into the institution of al-Azhar and the nature of education in the Arab World in general. Her discussion points specifically to the fact that it is at very best unwise to separate Islam from modern educational efforts in the Arab/Muslim world as its populace has not forgotten its classical Islamic philosophy on education, that is, one incorporating Islamic religious instruction.

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## The “Moral” Conquest: Education and Civilizational Ideology in Colonial Algeria

**Osama Abi-Mershed**

**Assistant Professor, History Department, Georgetown University**

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*“The French desired to educate the Arabs with, “A logic befitting the Arab soul,”  
as defined by the French...”*

Professor Abi-Mershed begins his presentation by emphasizing the weight of civilizational ideology and immediately launches into education’s great role in the French civilizing mission in colonial Algeria. Noting that one of the first French colonial initiatives in Algeria was to open schools, Mershed informs the

audience of the attitude that motivated the French in this endeavor. The French, Mershed states, were harshly critical of traditional Algerian modes of learning, feeling that they prized rote memorization above all and were stupidly preoccupied with religious instruction. As a result, the French felt their methods of instruction to be superior and assumed that the Algerian populace, the natives who they were saving from ignorance, would share in the opinion that the French conception of education was preferable. However, this was not the case and the French experienced severe problems of recruitment.

Muslim children did not want to attend culturally chauvinist schools and parents were equally reluctant to send them. France was thus forced to realize that Algeria was not the culturally clean slate they had assumed it to be. Indeed, as Mershed emphasizes, Algeria was rich in its own religion, language, culture, and accordant forms of learning. To further complicate matters, French schools fostered a military dimension to combat “terrorism” in what they termed the Arab Bureaus. The best and brightest from French schools would be recruited into special intelligence agencies for this purpose. Thus, as education and defense fused as one, extensive educational guidelines were laid out for governing colonial Algeria exemplified in legislation such as the decree of 1837 which stated that all Algerians must learn French. However, France could not realize its educational reforms and found that it had to take into account Algerian cultural and educational systems and evolve their alien system within Algerian institutions.

Thus, Professor Abi-Mershed’s discussion provided valuable insight into civilizational ideology in regards to colonizer civilizing missions, demonstrating how such missions will continually falter and unravel due to the severely erroneous and culturally chauvinist premises on which they are based.

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## **Education, Gender, and Cross Cultural Experiences with Reference to Elite Arab Women**

**Serra Kirdar**

**Post-Doctoral Fellow, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University**

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Serra Kirdar begins her discussion on education in the Arab World by stating her working paper’s goals. They include assessing the status and quality of the education presently provided in the Arab World, understanding the problems with current Arab education systems, and locating what she terms, the “mismatch” of Western and traditional Islamic approaches to learning and instruction and the ineffective and unsuccessful reforms they engender.

The Arab World, Kirdar reiterates, was not one historically closed. Indeed, as Kirdar reminds, the Koran mentions education 800 times. Thus, what is needed, Kirdar asserts, is a holistic approach to education in the Arab World which emphasizes the cornerstones of education in the traditional Arab/Islamic framework. Kirdar then proceeds to isolate the three fundamental tenets of the Islamic conception of education:

- Talabya: The concept of spiritual/religious knowledge
- Taleem : The secular studies (sciences, arts, etc.)
- Ta ad : Social Manners, knowledge of appropriate behaviors

However, she continues, this comprehensive approach to education in the Arab World has been lost and the education now offered is thus insufficient. The reason for this insufficiency is not funding. Indeed, speaking generally, Arab states allocate 5% of their budgets to education. Rather, Kirdar states, the problem is the aforementioned “mismatch” of education provided. While stating very clearly that a

fusion of Western and Arab approaches to education is essential, Kirdar faults education's current shortcomings with an incompetent effort at synthesis.

Arab governments, Kirdar notes, apply new ideas simply as a veneer over local practices, resulting in a system that does not transmit the goal of either traditional Arab/Islamic or modern Western practices. Traditional Arab styles of teaching are not conducive to learning, she continues, as there is an insufficient amount of student-teacher interaction for transmitting the skills necessary for productivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Further, officials rather than teachers, make all decisions concerning education. There is no community of teachers but often multiple ministries from which education directives come, resulting in a typically flawed top-down system of reform and a glaring disconnect between policy and local needs, the state controlling even the curriculums of private schools. Saudi Arabia, Kiradar mentions, illustrates this concept further, bearing a separate government division for administering girls' education.

Additionally, too much money is spent on the religious aspect of education, Egypt allocating 1/10 of its relevant resources and Saudi Arabia, 1/3 of its. Notably, values of the traditional Arab patriarchal family structure, Kirdar astutely observes, are replicated in the school system, resulting in an educational regimen of didactic pedagogy, forbidding questions, mistakes, or multiple approaches. Memorization is emphasized over analysis and Socratic exploration. Current educational practices, Kirdar concludes, engender fear and conformity.

As a result, Kirdar suggests that a new curriculum be developed in which religion is taught in a creative and interactive mode, in which education emphasizes the "hows" and "whys" rather than the "what," in which students are encouraged to analyze their own work and the information transmitted to them, in which they are encouraged to engage in dialogue with their instructors, and in which exams based on rote memorization are discouraged. Teachers, in turn, should be dynamic and trend conscious, taking part in regular workshops which stress the above- mentioned ideas. Finally, Arab governments must work as interactive facilitators of these reforms.

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The IRIS Center at the University of Maryland  
2105 Morrill Hall  
College Park, MD 20742  
Tel: 301-405-3110  
Web: [irisprojects.umd.edu/ppc\\_ideas](http://irisprojects.umd.edu/ppc_ideas)

**For more information about specific PPC IDEAS project activities, contact:**

[Dr. Ann Phillips, USAID/PPC](#)  
[Dr. Dennis Wood, IRIS Center](#)