

Arab Higher Education and Research post-2011. An Interview with Sara Hanafi

Interview by
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The upheavals of 2011 and subsequent developments in the MENA region have had substantial effects on universities and research centers within Arab world and in other neighboring countries where similar developments are taking shape (security issues, stricter political control/lesser levels of political control and repression, changing levels of funding, changing focus of donors etc.). META had the opportunity to talk with Sara Hanafi about the repercussions of these developments for scholarly work within the MENA region.



Sari Hanafi is currently a Professor of Sociology and chair of the department of sociology, anthropology and media studies at the American University of Beirut. He is also the editor of *Idafat: the Arab Journal of Sociology* (Arabic). He is the Vice President of the International Sociological Association (ISA) and Vice President of the board of the Arab Council of Social Science. He is the author of numerous journal articles and book chapters on the political and economic sociology of the Palestinian diaspora and refugees; sociology of migration; transnationalism;

politics of scientific research; civil society and elite formation and transitional justice. His last book is *Arab Research and Knowledge Society: New Critical Perspective* (with R. Arvanitis) (in Arabic, Beirut: CAUS and forthcoming in English with Routledge).

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I.B. & A.R.: To what extent would you define the Arab upheavals and subsequent developments as a game changer for Middle Eastern academic systems and institutions, and for the institutional landscape of knowledge production within the MENA region?

S.H.: The uprisings in the Arab World started out in a marginal town in Tunisia toward the end of 2010, traveled throughout the Arab region like wildfire, inspired various protest movements around the world, then gradually assumed different trajectories that are still underway. As is often the case with revolutions, these events continue to supply us with a repertoire of surprises, counter plots, setbacks, and successes. In this framework, I would say it is affecting the knowledge production in the region and will continue to do so. Previously the situation was disastrous

in many Arab countries. For instance, the Mubarak reign left feelings of discomfort among academics. All that made the public research institutions almost paralyzed. The stress on the university system was enormous: lack of funds, inappropriate structures, and bad management. We cannot but be convinced that some of the dry wood that fed the revolution was to be found among the frustrated academics and students. As an editor of *Idafat—the Arab Journal of Sociology*, I can testify that I received good submissions after the uprisings in Egypt, while before this was rare. However, the protracted period of authoritarianism will have a deep effect on knowledge production. The region was marginalized and invisible in international scholarship.

We have sufficient evidence that the scientific communities in the region are still very weak. In June 2014, I organized a tribute to Samir Khalaf, who is a professor of sociology at the American University of Beirut (AUB). When we sent this invitation to our mailing list, we received seven phone calls and emails asking us when Samir passed away, and four other emails asking when he retired. This anecdote highlights the Arab world's lack of tradition of paying tribute to someone if he is still alive or during his professional life. It

indicates an absence of a 'scientific community' in Lebanon which acknowledges the contribution of its members. Of course traditions are the result of an active re-enactment of our history. Scientific, academic and disciplinary communities are fond of these small rituals that revive the intellectual standing of their members and permit us to gauge our own position as a group, inside the 'community'. What is at stake in any of these informal evaluations is where we stand, and at the same time to which group we belong. Institutions make some of this boundary work, and the book I wrote with my colleague Rigas Arvanitis (*The Arab Research and Knowledge Production: A New Critical Perspective*), published recently in Beirut in Arabic, unfolds this problematic institutionalization that has taken place in the Arab world. It asks the question why MENA-region scientists wait so much to create an active scientific community, compared to other regions like Latin America. The problem is grounded in deeper social and political realms that influence the production of scientific knowledge.

I.B. & A.R.: To what degree does AUB as an elite western institution of higher learning and research located within the MENA region see the need to reposition itself within the regional institutional landscape as a consequence of such developments?

S.H.: The university system and the system of social knowledge production greatly influence elite formation in the Arab world. Many factors will play a role, but one of them is the compartmentalization of scholarly activities. Universities have often produced compartmentalized elites inside each nation-state who do not communicate with one another: They are either elite that publish globally and perish locally or elite that publish locally and perish globally. The American University of Beirut model has often failed to be connected to its local and regional context instead it orients itself toward an international audience. There are some efforts being conducted under the provost, Ahmad Dallal, but in my sense they are still insufficient.

I.B. & A.R.: How would you characterize the current trends towards the restructuring of universities in the MENA region? In what directions are they leading?

S.H.: There is a massive academic boom in higher education in the Arab world. One important pattern characterizing the current boom is a dual process of privatization alongside globalization. Two-thirds

(around 90) of the new universities founded in the Arab Middle East since 1993 are private, and more and more (at least 60) of them are branches of western, mostly American, universities. While offshore campuses (Qatar Education City, Dubai Campus) can protect the university from their conservative surrounding societies, this results in a tendency for the university to cut its ties with society. The parachuting of these structures does not encourage research output, and the social sciences in these institutions are very marginalized. If one had to choose between the Saudi model or the Qatari/Emirati model, I would argue that the former is much better, as it creates universities with local and Arab hiring, which is more sustainable than the international alternative. Finally, I am so worried about the commodification of higher education. I envy German people who resisted the privatization of their higher education and paying tuition in national universities. As Prof. Alaa Hamarneh once put it, Germans would accept neoliberalism everywhere but not in education and health.

In November 2014, US News, extending its previous repertoire, published a list of the "Best Arab Region Universities". According to this ranking, the "best" Arab five universities are King Saud University (Riyad, Saudi Arabia [SA]), King Abdulaziz

University (Jeddah, SA), King Abdullah University of Science & Technology (Thuwal, SA), Cairo University, and the American University of Beirut. Beyond this overall ranking, the newspaper offers rankings in each scientific field, an approximation to academic disciplines. While the whole concept of ranking is problematic, the ranking concerning the social science and humanities (SSH) is fundamentally flawed since most SSH production is in Arabic and the Arabic-language journals are not indexed by Scopus.

As Bourdieu once wrote, "standardization benefits the dominant," and these rankings want to consolidate the idea of a one-for-all standard, a measure that fits all, independent of contents, orientation, location or resources. Instead of thinking about universities as a social institution that fits a certain environment in terms of *ecology* (bio-diversity adapted to its environment), it is thought of in terms of *hierarchy* (how to attain the title of "the best" when competing against the 41-billion-dollar endowment of Harvard University). Limited to this elite formation function, the university becomes a caricature of itself. Effects in the country or the territory, activities beyond publishing, research, community services, participation in public debates, influence of policy decisions, contribution to local political life, dissemi-

nation of knowledge and arts, social organization, etc. become invisible in these one-dimensional rankings. Even the actual contribution of individuals highly devoted and loyal to their own home institution becomes a footnote in the career of academic faculty members. Rather more worrying is the fact the promotion reports, produced for promotion inside universities, decide the professional death or life of candidates. They are contaminated by benchmarking and the managerial view of "excellence" that obscures all other dimensions not part of the ranking in terms of publications. Ranking is thus part of an academic *celebrity model* that operates at a global level, in a selective way, as does globalization itself.

While I am not enthusiastic about any ranking, if a ranking is a must I can think of alternative methods and criteria for individual professors. Some principles should be taken into account in this regard:

All indicators should be scaled against the number of academic staff a university employs.

Bibliometrics may inform, but not replace peer review. Creation of national/language portal (such as The Flemish Academic Bibliographic Database for SSH). The newly established E-Ma'refa and Manhal are a starting point for the

Arab world, but they are still insufficient and it is better to have a national or an official pan-Arab organization create such a portal.

Benchmark the whole life cycle of research (i.e. including knowledge transfer and public/policy research activities). We admit that not all research should have an immediate relevance to local society. Thus research should be classified by temporality (research that needs time to have output [because of long fieldwork or because of political sensitivity of its content] versus research that yields quick results) and by public/policy relevance and knowledge transfer/innovation (looking at how much research income an institution earns from industry). Indicators of public/policy activities for the relevant research should be developed, including when these activities will yield relevant public and policy debates.

I.B. & A.R.: It has been argued that among the main challenges for scholars working in MENA academic institutions is the low level of global connectivity and visibility of knowledge production within MENA region. What are the main problems in your view that need to be tackled in order to increase the relevance of knowledge pro-

duction from within the region, and to what extent is this already happening?

S.H.: The bibliometric study we conducted of 519 academic articles written on the Arab uprisings in Arabic, English and French demonstrated that there is a hierarchy of legitimacy in knowledge due in part to where the articles are produced. The majority of articles are indeed produced outside the Arab World and in English. This is primarily due to the hegemony of the English language in social science research, facilitated by the dominance of Western academic institutions and think tanks, as well as the standards of publication in international journals, which make little to no effort in accommodating foreign languages. Furthermore, what little knowledge is being produced within the Arab world is produced in Arabic and not being translated. In fact, scarcely any authors who write in English or French reference in Arabic. To a large extent, authors who write in a particular language, cite in that particular language. The issue of language compartmentalization becomes significantly poignant here. I see translation an opportunity for increased reflexivity, which might lead to new ways of conceptualizing and articulating concepts. New ways of thinking can indeed be *found* in translation, as long as translation is un-

derstood and practiced as a process that is never-ending, dialectical, and imbued with heuristic tensions.

Given Arab scholars' lack of resources, language barriers, and poor publication record in mainstream journals, it is clear that many Arab scholars working in Arabic and within national institutions are virtually invisible internationally. The challenge today is the disengagement of social science research from its local context, which is amplified by the hegemony of neoliberal interests and concurrent narratives for change, as well as the marginalization of local knowledge by many Arab scholars who suffer from both local and global constraints on knowledge production.

I.B. & A.R.: How would you characterize the impact of the ongoing transformations in the MENA region on working relations between scholars and academic institutions located there and those in the global North?

S.H.: The current transformation in the Arab world definitely has begun to foster cooperation with the North. The greatest evidence of this is the northern funding for research and collaboration in the Arab world. Some international social projects do not fund research but merely

workshops. One typical example is the projects funded by the French *Agence National de la Recherche* (ANR). In six recent projects in which I have identified the involvement of Arab researchers, some of them were frustrated that the research they conduct is not paid, even for the research assistant. Many local researchers ended up unable to make their contribution visible: they contribute to two publications among twenty publications resulting from these ANR projects. This does not mean that there is simply a monopoly held by the French research team, but also lack of interest in some Arab researchers. These projects also do not have funding for translation. Overall, it seems that the formation of international teams in the social sciences is rather rare and collaborations are often conducted individually.

On the other hand, the absence of international collaborations is often voluntary, sometimes for personal or ideological reasons. We are amazed to find some faculty in Arab universities who speak perfect English and French unwilling to communicate with their peers abroad. They say clearly that they are not interested. These cases of researchers who adopt a sort of a counter-hegemonic position are, however, not very common.

The fields of natural sciences are often supported by powerful institutional frameworks. In Lebanon, for historical reasons, many relationships are established with France, as we have shown. This trend is now reflected in stronger collaboration within the framework of European projects. Increasingly, these collaborations go through PhD co-supervision, a new practice favored by French universities which has become fairly common with Lebanese PhDs. Articles co-authored with European researchers rose sharply. Little collaboration exists with other researchers in the Arab countries and the Middle East. Finally, the links that AUB and the Lebanese American University have established for the accreditation of their program in the United States facilitate collaborations with this country without excluding access to European and Arab funding.

We should admit that there is a tension between the internationalization of research and its local relevance. One researcher from the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth [USJ] put it clearly that when Lebanese researchers do not have links to the local private sector, they end up looking for international collaboration. This was repeated by one professor in engineering at AUB who affirmed that “the university

should be an ivory tower. We don't approach the private sector. Let it come to us if they need us. We have our reputation.” In the Lebanese context, I may schematically consider AUB as the most internationalized university, USJ (specifically in applied research) as most locally relevant and the Lebanese University as having missed the opportunities to be locally or globally relevant.

I.B. & A.R.: How do you see the development of social science in the region in the future?

S.H.: In spite of these amazing developments in the Arab world, propelled by ongoing transformations, there are two forces that seek the de-legitimization of the social sciences: the authoritarian political elites, as well as some ideological groups such as certain religious authorities.

It is rare in the Arab region to hear of a ‘white paper’ written by social scientists at the request of the public authority and debated in the public sphere. Sociologists are working either as elements in the matrix of modernization projects, though not as an independent body, or as servile agents restricted to justifying the government's decisions. Even when

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the former Tunisian dictator Ben Ali during the 1990s positively referred to science in his discourse and used it as an ideological weapon in his ruthless struggle against the Tunisian Islamists, he did not refer to the social sciences but to the 'hard' natural and applied sciences. In many Arab countries, scientific meetings are treated like any other public meeting and held under police surveillance, and principled social scientists have often been sent to prison, exiled or assassinated. An intelligence officer once told me: "All of my group [of dissident social scientists] fills less than one bus and can easily be taken to prison!" On a positive note, generally speaking, Arab authoritarian states have always underestimated the salience of such "bus people," whether defined as dissident intellectuals or more generally the enlightened middle class, in stirring protests.

Religious authorities have often felt threatened by social scientists, as the two groups competed over the discourse on society. A study on family planning in Syria that I did many years ago revealed tense television debates involving a religious leader and an activist: the late Sheikh Mohamed Said Ramadan al-Bouti (who argued that Islam is against any form of family planning) versus an anti-

clericalist activist from the General Union of Syrian Women, a state-sponsored organization. While family planning falls squarely within the domain of sociology and demography, no social scientist was ever consulted for these public debates. Another example can be drawn from Qatar. The Qatari authorities protected themselves from conservative political and religious commissars by asking the Qatari branches of foreign universities to teach the same curriculum as their program at the university headquarters. However, who would protect professors within these parachuting universities? In a recent interview, the President of Carnegie Mellon University Qatar, in order to "protect himself," stated that the Qatari authorities were responsible for the university's curriculum. So everyone tried to preempt the debate in a context already problematic, as the freedom of expression is very limited. The development of a "sphere for science" could become an extra-territorial space of exception, in the sense that local laws do not necessarily apply to it, bestowing the freedom to criticize the surrounding society, but running the risk of being disconnected from societal needs.

While the social sciences worldwide, along with philosophy, were one of the major tools for reforming religion, this

has not been the case in the Arab world. Still, some changes are visible that might inspire hope regarding the future of social sciences in the MENA region: In Saudi Arabia for instance, the Namaa Center for Research and Studies and the Taseel Center for Studies and Research are two recently established research centers that aim at connecting the sharia (religious studies) to modernity. Namaa declares in its mission statement the need for moderate Islamic discourse to be integrated with intellectual discourse and its tools for the sake of "conscious development" and of connection to "knowledge and experience of the contemporary world." The titles of the three studies mentioned in the website are very revealing: "Freedom or Sharia?," "Problems of values between culture and science," and "Averroes' school of thought and its connection to the European renaissance." Already invoking positively Averroes' school of thought is something very new in a country dominated by Salafism and Wahabism. More specifically regarding the social sciences, one of the Saudi authors that Namaa promotes is Abdullal Sufiani. In 2004 Sufiani received a PhD in Education from the Islamic University of Madineh (SA) with an endeavor to do crossover between education as a science and fiqh. His PhD thesis is entitled:

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“Regulations of educational critiques through fatwas of Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah and their application in the field of educational research.” In a lecture on the hidden factors influencing the faqihs (jurisprudents or the religious lawyers of Islam), Sufiani challenged the sacrality of faqihs, using psychology and sociology referring to Freud and Ibn Khaldoun.

I.B. & A.R.: Thank you very much!