Arab Social Science Monitor - Third Report
Long abstract

The academic universes of social scientists in the Arab world: Career trajectories and networks in universities

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The third Arab Social Science Monitor Report (ASSR3) aims to chart the career trajectories of social scientists and humanists within the institutional ecosystems in the Arab world that enable or constrain the progress of these careers. The first Arab Social Science Report (ASSR1)[1] documented a rapid increase in the number of universities in the region over the past three decades and contended that a "silent knowledge revolution has taken shape across the Arab world over the last two or three decades, even though we still know little about that revolution's actual content."[2] But the content of this "knowledge" surge is not the only aspect of the social science and humanities knowledge landscape that requires further and deeper exploration. While it is conceivable that the increase in the number of universities as well as the current societal upheavals in the Arab world contributed to more interest in deploying social science and humanities knowledge as tools to understand and even drive societal transformation, the increase in the number of universities is skewed on the side professional degrees as opposed to critical social science and humanistic analysis. According to the Arab Social Science Monitor databases,[3] universities may have tripled between 1990 and 2019, but the number of universities *not* offering social sciences and humanities degrees grew 5-fold during this period. Political instability and the lack of basic professional security also compromise the ability of many social scientists and humanists to pursue independent research agendas. In addition, recent studies have shown that, compared to other countries in the region and the world, the overall volume of scientific research and production, the average number of publications per researcher, as well as the average number of publications per million population remained very low. These trends raise questions that can only be answered empirically.

This report looks at the ways in which the careers of individual social scientists and humanists unfold within the academic sphere and principally within the institution of the university. ASSR3 aims to identify individual as well as institutional and occupational characteristics of the careers of Arab social scientists and humanists, including: their biographical profiles (age, gender, citizenship and current residence); education (fields of study, level and year of obtained degrees, issuing institution,

[1] Bamyeh, Mohammad. 2015. *Social Sciences in the Arab World: of Presence*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.
[2] Bamyeh, Mohammad. 2016. "Introduction: The Social Sciences in the Arab World." *Global Dialogue: Magazine of the International Sociological Association* 6(4) http://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/introduction-the-social-sciences-in-the-arab-world/
[3] dataverse.theacss.org

university location and public/private status); research profile (fields and themes of research, geographic scope of research, quantity and quality and form and venue of research output, evaluation criteria); and employment (including job title, type and location of employing institution, professional duties, and recruitment and promotion criteria). The ASSR3 thus aims to sketch the careers of Arab social scientists or humanists, and to shed light on the opportunities, motivations, incentives and barriers to careers in the social sciences and humanities.

The ASSR3 is based on information collected through 3 instruments:

1) **A survey of Arab social scientist and humanists**: a survey of Arab social scientists and humanists was conducted in Spring 2019 by the ACSS covering a wide range of disciplines and fields including multidisciplinary fields.[4] For the purposes of the survey Arab social scientists and humanists are defined as citizens of any Arab country, who are currently living and working in any of the 22 member countries of the League of Arab States.[5] As such, the survey excluded Arab nationals who work outside the region, as well as non-Arab nationals who work in the region.

The survey questionnaire contained five modules covering: (a) Socio-demographic information (b) Higher education (c) Employment history (d) Research and (e) Languages proficiency. Some key questions that the survey attempts to answer relate to the academic and professional formation of Arab social scientists and humanists, including: where they study; their academic training; their demographics including age and gender distributions; their institutional homes; recruitment and evaluation criteria; professional mobility; the volume and quality of their research output and the institutional setups that enable or hinder their ability to conduct research.

Due to the nature of the sample and the diversity of organizational structures, the analysis was limited to the sub-sample of respondents who worked in a university or a university-based research center. The number of holders of advanced degrees in the social sciences and humanities and who are not affiliated with universities may in fact be larger than those with academic affiliation, and conceivably may even exercise a more significant social impact than university-based academics if they are in positions where their academic training informs their professional practices. Assessing the impact--the success or marginality, as well as relevance or irrelevance--of a social science and humanities academic training is much broader than a narrow focus on professional trajectory of academic careers. However, surveying this professional population outside of universities is an extremely challenging task and is beyond the scope of this report. Still, focusing on the academic context sheds light on the social dynamics of social science and humanities fields that shape academic and non-academic career trajectories and social impact more broadly. At a minimum, the expansion of social science and humanities academic programs suggests an increased number of graduates. It is not clear whether social science and humanities professionals contribute to the rationalization of governance and management in Arab

[4] Anthropology, Archeology, Cultural Studies, Demography, Development Studies, Economics, Gender Studies, Geography, History, Literature, Philosophy, Political Sciences, Psychology, Regional/International Studies, Religious Studies, and Sociology.

[5] Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

countries through their specific expertise, or if the degree simply satisfies the nominal requirement of having a university degree to qualify for employment in the public sector. In fact, semi-structured interviews of a sub-sample of the survey respondents suggests that the state is a barrier to social science research, and that the governments deliberately marginalize social science researchers in the decision making process.

2) **Three Background papers that analyze the survey data**: The survey was completed by 1,121 social scientists in the region, 78% of whom were based at universities. Two background papers were commissioned to provide analysis of the survey data.[6] Due to nature of the sample and the diversity of organizational structures outside academia, the analysis was limited to the sub-sample of the survey respondents who worked in a university or a university-based research center.

A third background paper provided semi-structured interviews with a random sample of respondents to the ACSS online survey in order to supplement the quantitative survey.[7]

3) **Six Background papers providing qualitative insights that help contextualize the quantitative data of the survey.**[8] While the ASSR3 does not attempt to provide a history of the social science and humanities fields in the Arab world, nor a systematic analysis of the integration of the Arab social sciences and humanities into the international scholarly communities in these fields, the background papers provide information that helps situate the quantitative data of the survey within qualitative contexts.

The background papers underscore the fact that the present does not exist in a vacuum. As such, an added aim of the report is to identify foundational legacies as well as institutional continuities and ruptures in the history of the academic social sciences and humanities. The background papers also shed light on the way social scientists and humanists conceive of their own careers and the way they are viewed by society, and how these perceptions changed over time. Additionally, the perspectives of Arab social scientists and humanists who pursued careers outside the Arab world shed light on some of the reasons for leaving their countries of origin, as well as the ways their careers compare to those who are based in the Arab world.

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[6] Latreche, Abdelkader. 2020. *Taqrir tahlil nata'ij mash al-marsad al-Arabi lil-ulum al-ijtima'iyya*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences; Sieverding, Maia. 2020. *Social Scientists and Social Science Careers in the Arab Region: An analysis of the Characteristics of Arab Social Scientists and Humanists Survey 2019.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

[7] Ghannouchi, Cyrine N. 2020. *Report on Phase II: Semi-structured interviews.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

[8] Bardawil, Fadi. 2019. *Memoirs of Arab Intellectuals: an Archive of Intellectual Practices*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences; Bou Khater, Lea. 2019. *Transnational Academic Mobility: Experience of Arab Social Scientists*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences; Nauffal, Diane and Kamal Abouchedid. 2019. *National Research Strategies and University Strategic Plans in the Arab Region.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences; Nauffal, Diane and Kamal Abouchedid. 2019. *Promotion Policies and Recruitment in Selective Key Universities in the Arab Region*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences; Kreichati, Cynthia. 2019. *Editorial Boards in the Arab Region*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences; Kreichati, Cynthia. 2019. *Social Sciences in NGOs and Research Centers in the Arab region*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

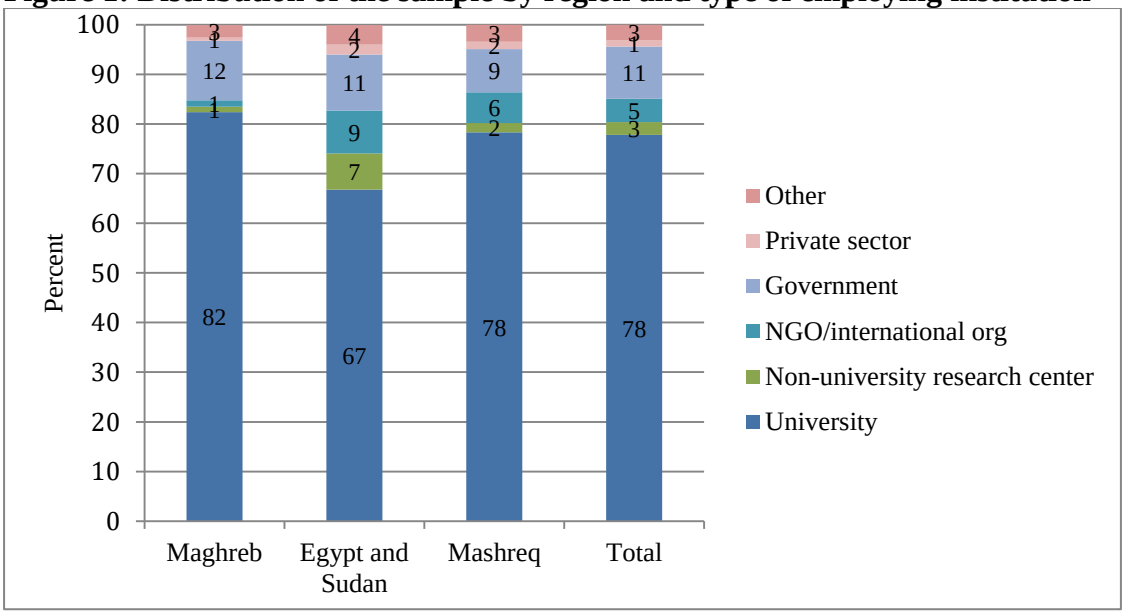
"Transnational" Arab social scientists are asked to reflect on the reasons they chose to pursue careers outside the Arab world when it is the focus of their teaching and research, and the nature of their engagement with it. The papers highlight historical and institutional structures and policies that shape the careers of social scientists and humanists in the Arab world. They provide glimpses of formative moments in the history of the social sciences and humanities; a snapshot of the career profiles of Arab academics based outside the Arab world whose research in the fields of social sciences and humanities focuses on Arab countries; the role of research as articulated in the mission statements and strategic plans of private and public universities, against the actual measures instituted to support and enable research; diverse recruitment and promotion models in various universities in Arab countries; the logistics and academic rigor of editorial policies for select social science and humanities refereed journals; and the position and role of the social sciences in NGOs and research centers in select universities in the Arab world.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The Survey

The results of the survey suggest a few preliminary conclusions. The survey was sent to 14,635 social scientists and humanists and, as noted above, was completed by 1,121 (7.7%) eligible respondents. Of this sample, 95% of the respondents are employed and the analysis excluded respondents who are unemployed or retired at the time of the survey because the focus of the analysis was on social science careers and particularly current employment. Over three quarters of employed respondents are currently based at universities, and their work typically includes teaching and student supervision, research, and university service. Aside from universities, the respondents' employment types included, in this order of frequency, government jobs, NGOs, international organizations and research centers, schools, and the private sector (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of the sample by region and type of employing institution



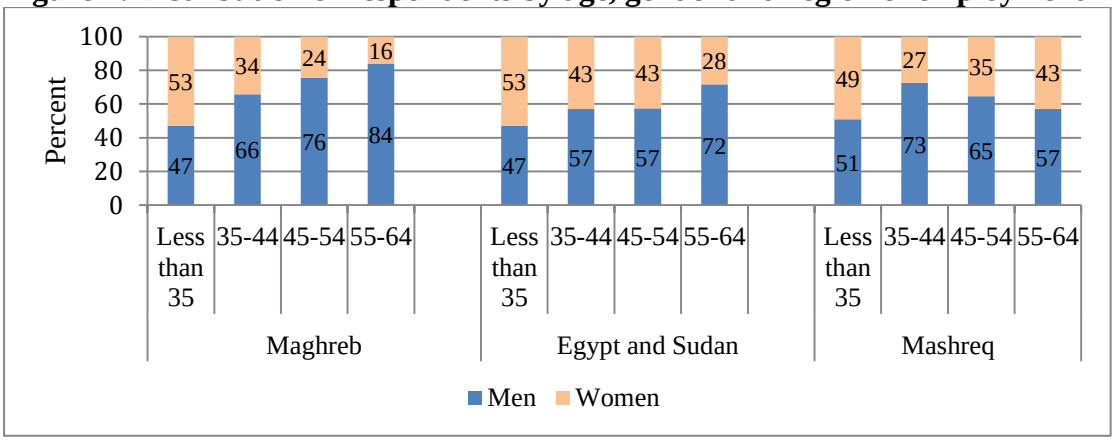
Source: Sieverding, Maia. 2020. *Social Scientists and Social Science Careers in the Arab Region: An analysis of the Characteristics of Arab Social Scientists and Humanists Survey 2019.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

This distribution reflects the sampling frame of the survey that includes mostly university-based individuals and is therefore not representative of all social scientists in the Arab world. Moreover, there were insufficient respondents to disaggregate by other types of employment in the government or NGO/international organization sectors.

The targeted sample of the survey includes members of academic institutions either working or studying. In the latter case, some of these students are aspiring academics even if they hold careers outside academia while completing their studies. University-based respondents were considerably older than those working at other types of institutions, with about half of those at universities aged 45 and above, compared to only about 30% of those in the same age bracket who are working in other types of institutions. This is possibly due to the fact that older respondents are likely to hold PhDs, which is increasingly a requirement for securing a university position; a substantial portion of the youngest respondents (<35) were completing PhDs at the time of the survey, while also working. This may also indicate that despite the increase in the number of universities and social sciences and humanities programs, less employment opportunities are available in universities for younger graduates. The social scientists with whom we conducted semi-structures interviews also suggest that working in the public sector provides socio-economic security and stability in unstable times, even if the experience of working in the public sector is not very rewarding. In contrast, some interviewees cited civil society as a viable alternative that offers more interesting opportunities and freedom, and where they would find themselves acknowledged and rewarded in terms of visibility and income.

The survey results also suggest a gradual increase in the number of women entering the social science and humanities fields. Although two thirds of the sample respondents are men, women constitute 16% of respondents aged above 65, about a third of the respondents aged 35-64, and about half of those under 35 (Figure 2). This pattern varies in different regions of the Arab world, and is most pronounced in the Maghreb, where the percentage of women among the oldest respondents was the lowest among Arab countries.

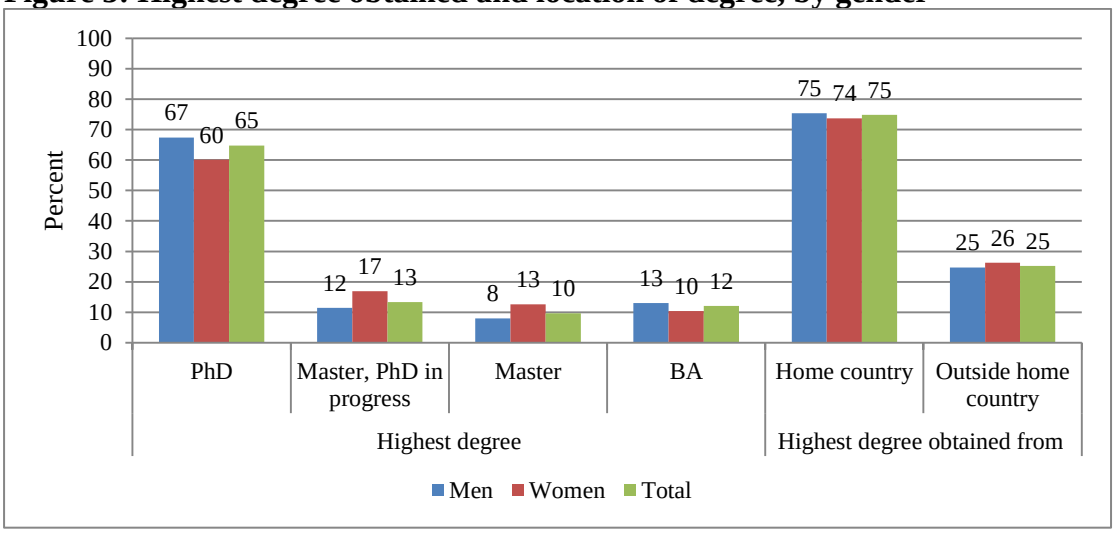
Figure 2: Distribution of respondents by age, gender and region of employment



Source: Sieverding, Maia. 2020. *Social Scientists and Social Science Careers in the Arab Region: An analysis of the Characteristics of Arab Social Scientists and Humanists Survey 2019.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

Although the total number of women is less than the number of men, comparable percentages of each group are likely to obtain a higher degree abroad, suggesting comparable career trajectories at least up to the point of receiving a doctoral degree (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Highest degree obtained and location of degree, by gender



Note: The categories degree obtained elsewhere in the Arab region and obtained outside the Arab region are combined due to small sample sizes.

Source: Sieverding, Maia. 2020. *Social Scientists and Social Science Careers in the Arab Region: An analysis of the Characteristics of Arab Social Scientists and Humanists Survey 2019.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

On the other hand, although women are just as likely to complete their education, once working in universities they are likely to hold lower academic rank than men. This is comparable to trends in other countries, where women in academia are at a disadvantage and are likely to take longer time to secure academic jobs after graduation, and to be promoted once employed. This could be a result of direct gender discrimination, or it could be due to the lack of policies that account for time spent in childcare or for the common demands of taking primary responsibility for home care. Regardless of the motivations, if these challenges are not addressed, they would affect the career trajectories of the growing number of female social scientists and humanists.

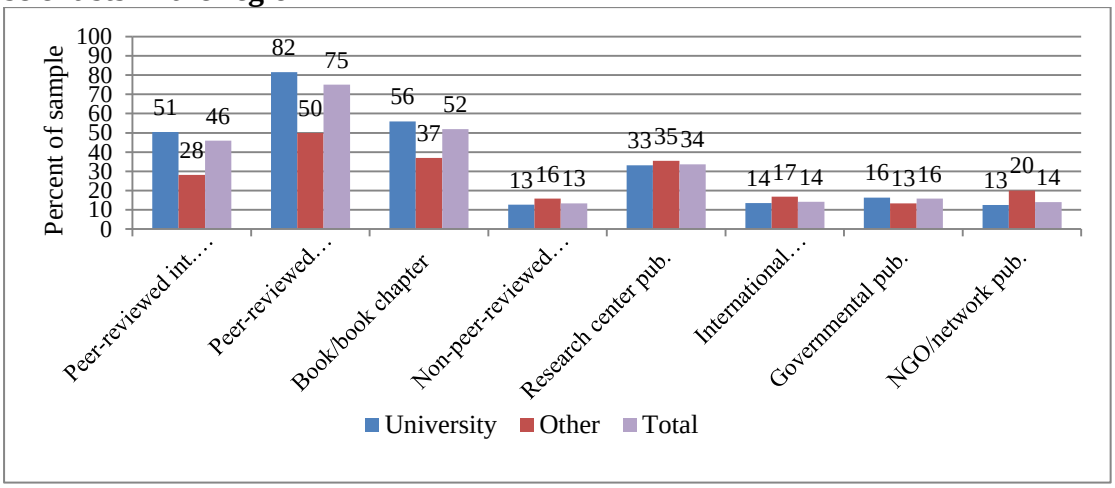
About three-quarters of respondents obtained their highest degree from their home country, 7% from another Arab country and 18% from outside the region. Younger respondents are more likely to have received their degrees locally; 20% of respondents aged less than 35 obtained their highest degrees outside their home countries compared to 45% for those aged 55 and above. This may reflect increasing opportunities for completing post-graduate degrees in Arab countries. On its own, this pattern is not sufficient to determine whether local institutions are sufficiently equipped to train qualified social scientists and humanists, or simply that most students do not have the means to travel and study abroad, or due to other constraints such as visa regimes.

Expansion of academic programs reflects an expanded number of professionals.

The vast majority is employed locally in their home countries. This shows that the fortunes of a career in the social sciences or humanities are largely tied to the home country, suggesting that solutions to professional challenges cannot be parachuted from the outside, and must be rooted in deliberate homegrown reform programs within individual countries.

Social scientists and humanists in the region published in a variety of outlets including peer reviewed journals, books, and research center and policy-oriented publications. Around half of the respondents have peer-reviewed publications in international journals, but the most common publication outlets were national or regional peer-reviewed journals, and the overall volume of publications in international venues is significantly lower than in local and regional ones (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Publication outlets among university and non-university based social scientists in the region



Source: Sieverding, Maia. 2020. *Social Scientists and Social Science Careers in the Arab Region: An analysis of the Characteristics of Arab Social Scientists and Humanists Survey 2019.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

Additionally, the publication volume for women is lower than for men, even after taking into consideration for age differential and career stage. Predictably, the quantity of publication correlates with having a doctoral degree, the number of years since the degree was received, and the number of years during which the respondents have held university positions. On the other hand, respondents who received their degrees outside their home countries tend to have a smaller number of publications. This might be due to easier access to local publication venues or to higher acceptance rates in local journals.

If publishing in international peer-reviewed journals is more selective, it is reasonable to assume that it is a measure of the quality of the publication (and we therefore used it as a proxy for quality). If so, then quality correlates with having received the highest degree outside the Arab world as well as proficiency in English. These findings also suggest a difference in publishing requirements and policies between the Arab world and international journals. As such, the ability to publish in international venues depends on developing familiarity with the standards of western academic presses.

The Context

The careers of some Arab social science and humanities prominent authorities, as gleaned from their memoirs, do not only suggest continuities in the status of the social sciences and humanities and in structural challenges that mar these fields from their modern beginnings to the present, but also reveal a formative self-perception that is often echoed by later generations of social scientists and humanists. Some of the examined memoirs were written by intellectual gurus who started their careers around the time of founding of modern Arab universities.[9] Some of these intellectuals travelled to study the social sciences or humanities in the West before going back to their countries to play a central role in giving form to new educational systems. And some have been idealized as the very embodiment of the new humanities and social science education, ushering a new era of intellectual production shaped in their own images. Interestingly, as corroborated by the semi-structured interviews we conducted with a sub-sample of the survey respondents, the sense among early social scientists and humanists of embarking on grand socially transformative projects is still echoed among many contemporary social scientists. The social scientists interviewed suggest that the problems of the Arab world are exacerbated by the neglect of social science analysis and the academic and professional marginalization of the social sciences as opposed to the exact sciences. Still, the sub-sample of social scientists interviewed exhibit a sense of pride in their social role and responsibility towards future generations, despite the dire material realities of their careers which, incidentally, they would not recommend to relatives or friends. Another common thread is the sense of bitterness and disenchantment with a limiting educational system equally subservient to traditions and to the state and its corrupt agents. What this past and present disenchantment suggests is a disconnect between the grand self-perception of the pivotal role of the social sciences and humanities in society and their actual impact in the lived experiences of social scientists and humanists.[10]

The social scientists with whom we conducted semi-structured interviews identify themselves as belonging to low to middle-class families. Often, their transformational educational journey is paralleled with moving from rural or provincial parts of the country to the capital or a large provincial city. The challenges along the way of completing one's education are often financial, and also include social challenges as in raising a family or countering gender biases. When talking about their original interest in the social sciences and the motivation to pursue a social science degree, those interviewed refer to influences from within their living environment, including intellectual exposure, the influence of a role model, or the impact of a social phenomenon or a major political event (such as armed conflict or the Arab Spring). Interestingly, the initial choice to pursue a social science university degree is also attributed to the lack of alternative choices. In other words, a social science degree is not pursued because of interest in the field in its own right, but simply because the eligibility criteria to join other fields were not met. Alternatively, a brilliant student, perhaps with limited financial means, would be advised to enroll in

[9] With the exception of a small number of foreign operated institutions established in the 19th century, public higher education grew significantly with the decline of colonialism, especially after the middle of the 20th century. See, for example, Andre Elias Mazawi, "Contrasting perspectives on higher education governance in the Arab states," in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Volume 20. (Springer: 2005). 133-189.

[10] Bardawil, Fadi. 2019. *Memoirs of Arab Intellectuals: an Archive of Intellectual Practices*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

a highly regarded university regardless of the field of study. To be sure, the interest in the field would grow in the course of study, but the arbitrariness of the initial interest stands in clear contrast to making a deliberate choice in response to one's social and intellectual environment. Most of those interviewed also talk about institutional challenges they faced during their studies, including inadequate infrastructure and technical skills needed for study and research, lack of access to information and data or even adequate library resources, outdated pedagogical approaches and the pronounced generational gap between faculty and students, and the lack of mentorship and advising by the faculty. Importantly, a key challenge is the lack of academic freedom and the potential conflicts with teachers and peers because of political beliefs.[11]

Universities and policy-oriented research centers (sponsored by governments, international organizations or NGOs) often converge in the scope of their research agendas, and complement each other either through formal institutional collaborations or when these research centers offer consultancies to university professors. They also share challenges related to their social relevance, financial and institutional sustainability, autonomy, and more broadly prestige and job security. However, it seems that NGO-based research centers are often considered less academic, and that a hierarchy of knowledge and professional prestige ranks universities above research centers. This may be due to the smaller number jobs and lower job security provided by research centers, but it may also be due to the fact that, by design, some policy oriented research centers channel and hence structurally limit the intellectual autonomy of their researchers.[12]

Along similar lines, interviews with social scientists based outside the Arab world provides a background against which the experiences of scholars in the Arab world might be better understood. The interviewed 'transnational' scholars explain the reasons for their choice of work location, the factors that enabled them to relocate as well as those that constrained their mobility, and the professional advantages as well as difficulties of their current work arrangements. Many were driven to leave their countries because of instability or political oppression. Others left for lack of professional and financial opportunities in their home countries. In retrospect, most interviewed scholars seem to suggest that academic achievement and secure professional trajectory are byproducts of their relocation, but these do not seem to be the main reasons for choosing to relocate in the first place. On the other hand, it is clear that most scholars in the region do not have the opportunity or possibility to relocate, especially to good academic institutions abroad. However, the contrasts between options, resources, career trajectories, and institutional and intellectual benchmarks inside and outside Arab countries shed light on some of the structural limitations of a social science and humanities academic career in the Arab world.[13]

An overview of promotion policies and recruitment practices in a select group of Arab universities provides examples of structural challenges facing social scientists and humanists (and academics in general). The selected universities aspire to achieve

[11] Ghannouchi, Cyrine N. 2020. *Report on Phase II: Semi-structured interviews.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.
[12] Kreichati, Cynthia. 2019. *Social Sciences in NGOs and Research Centers in the Arab region*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.
[13] Bou Khater, Lea. 2019. *Transnational Academic Mobility: Experience of Arab Social Scientists*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

international recognition as a way to buttress their local competitiveness. Towards this end, they adopt, at least nominally, international evaluation criteria that prioritize publishing in indexed international refereed venues, and give lesser weight to local publications. The aim of establishing standards for evaluation is reasonable, but one byproduct of this strategy is to establish a hierarchy of knowledge production that elevates English and French language publications over publishing in Arabic. This may suggest a tension between the role of universities in serving their societies versus their role in remaining globally competitive and meeting the international academic standards of their respective fields and disciplines. The social scientists with whom we conducted semi-structured interviews maintain that knowledge production in Arabic is not sufficient for a real participation in worldwide knowledge production. A somewhat related trend in many relatively new Arab universities is to focus on the creation of new applied programs that cater to emerging market needs, thereby sidestepping the question of research and knowledge production all together.[14]

To be sure, research is often prominently featured in national and university strategies and strategic plans, but there seems to be no direct correlation between such strategies and the research output of academics in these universities, including social scientists and humanists. Moreover, the actual incentives and resources deployed to support research, including funding, available time for research, and its weight in the evaluation criteria, vary greatly across universities. In fact, the sub-sample of the survey respondents with whom we conducted semi-structured interviews lament the lack of funding and absence of regional publishing venues, both of which are considered in the tenure and promotion process. Furthermore, judging by research output metrics, the structures for supporting social science and humanities research are not as effective as the aspirational visions suggest, and it is not clear that research is a primary mechanism for career advancement. And there is no clear evidence that the increase in the number of universities, and the attendant increase in social science and humanities programs and departments, translate into enhanced research productivity, either in terms of quantity or, to the extent that this can be derived from external indicators, in terms of quality.[15]

One way to assess the quality of research publications is to examine editorial processes and criteria in academic journals and periodicals. Even when focusing the examination on reputable social science and humanities journals, it is clear that there is a gap between the stated editorial process on paper and actual real life editorial practices. This raises questions about the credibility of the editorial processes, and by extension about the quality of the publications in these journals. Moreover, the quality of Arabic publications cannot be properly assessed for lack of adequate citation metrics for Arabic materials. However, beyond the politics of citation, and despite the relative advantage of publishing in English or French for academic recognition and professional progress, it is reasonable to conclude that at least some of the leading Arabic language periodicals play a role in creating communities of scholars that contribute to the cultivation of the social sciences and humanities.[16]

[14] Nauffal, Diane and Kamal Abouchedid. 2019. *Promotion Policies and Recruitment in Selective Key Universities in the Arab Region*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.
[15] Nauffal, Diane and Kamal Abouchedid. 2019. *National Research Strategies and University Strategic Plans in the Arab Region.* Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.
[16] Kreichati, Cynthia. 2019. *Editorial Boards in the Arab Region*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

CONCLUSIONS

The ASSR3 focuses on individual as well as institutional and occupational characteristics of the careers of Arab social scientists and humanists within universities. Quantitative and qualitative research was conducted for this purpose and the results suggest generational and gender shifts among social scientists in the region as well as some structural limitations of a social science and humanities academic career in the Arab world. The research conducted also raises further research questions that could be explored in future reports.

The results suggest a gradual trend of feminization of the social sciences and humanities fields, with women constituting increasingly larger proportions of both younger age groups and more recently granted social science degrees at all levels. They also suggest comparable career trajectories for women and men at least up to the point of receiving a doctoral degree. However, although women are just as likely to complete their education as men, once working in universities they are likely to hold lower academic rank than men.

Younger respondents are more likely to have received their degrees locally and this may reflect increasing opportunities for completing post-graduate degrees in Arab countries. However, on its own, this pattern is not sufficient to determine whether local institutions are sufficiently equipped to train qualified social scientists and humanists.

In their attempt to achieve international recognition as a way to buttress their local competitiveness, some universities in the Arab world adopt international standards in their promotion policies, such as prioritizing publishing in indexed international refereed venues over local publication. While this is reasonable, by establishing a hierarchy of knowledge production that elevates English and French language publications over publishing in Arabic, this strategy creates structural challenges to social scientists and humanists (and academics in general). This may suggest a tension between the role of universities in serving their societies versus their role in remaining globally competitive and meeting the international academic standards of their respective fields and disciplines.