

Researchers for Democracy and Better Education in the Middle East

By Abdel-Raouf Sinno/Beirut

Academics are pioneers in their societies. What specifically the Humboldt Foundation's alumni can do to encourage re-thinking and social change in the Middle East.

It was a long road Europe had to take to develop into the secular, democratic societies of today, societies that after the Second World War managed to overcome historic conflicts, establish political stability and build a common market. The countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa on the other hand, although many of them did achieve political independence after the Second World War, have often not got far down this road.

Catching up to be done in the Middle East

Tribal thinking as well as ethnic and religious tension are still very common in the region. Power monopolies, insufficient seriousness of purpose with regard to development programmes, combined with political and military conflicts, continue to be the cause of ignorance, illiteracy and poverty. The technology gap between this region and the West gets ever larger. Admittedly, improvements have come about in education and health in the last few years, but development initiatives of this kind tend to go up in smoke when faced with the burgeoning problems: take, for example, the low level of economic growth, the dramatic increase in the population and the pillaging carried out by corrupt regimes, whilst at the same time budgets for education and health are modest and expenditure on weapons is increasing.

There is a correlation between economic growth and size of income on the one hand, and poverty, unemployment, ignorance, disease and malnutrition on the other. If you have a good income you can invest in better education and spend more on food and health. And education in its turn leads to higher employment, helps to increase income and promotes economic growth. Knowledge is the most important benchmark for sustainable development. It is essential that the region trains well-qualified, creative individuals, not just certificate-holders.

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Research should become a force for socio-economic development. However, Arab states spend less than one percent of their gross national product on research; in Israel, by contrast, it is more than three percent. Between 1991 and 2009, military

conflicts in the Middle East swallowed up twelve trillion dollars, which could have been used for economic growth and development. Most of the countries do not have developed technological industries. Agriculture is underproductive, and domestic goods often cannot compete with imports. According to the United Nations, the Arab states have a great deal of catching up to do, both in research and development and in democratisation and equal opportunities for women. We have to modernise our economies and societies and increase cooperation. Apart from improving training at all levels, it is essential, above all, that we solve our conflicts in accordance with the principles of justice and human rights. A just solution for the issue of Palestine is a strategic measure for achieving political stability and opening markets.

The Role of the Humboldtians

What can the Humboldt Foundation's alumni do to encourage social modernisation? In their own countries most of them work as academics or professors at universities and research institutions or in administration. They act as a bridge between their national universities and research institutes and those in Germany. Just like other academics and intellectuals, they are pioneers in their societies. As such, they should try to bring about peaceful change at home by bonding with other Humboldt Alumni in the country or region, for example, and by introducing the elements of a developed and democratic society they have got to know and appreciate in Germany.

They can work for better educational policy, better training and the introduction of the latest technology as well as for an independent judiciary and functioning civil society. They can push through reforms in the institutions they work for and campaign for the freedom of academic thought. They have to stand up against fanaticism, intolerance and extremism and promote education in democracy and equality.

This all requires commitment and strength. But what is the alternative? Radical opposition? Going with the flow and subordinating oneself, or even profiting from the system? Emigrating and becoming part of the brain drain that weakens our societies? For Humboldtians, these are simply not alternatives.



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Photo: private

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<http://www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/kosmos-humboldtians-in-focus-95-2.html>