

Does Academic Freedom Globalize? The Diffusion of the American Model of Education to the Middle East and Academic Freedom

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Advocates for expanding university branch campuses to the Middle East argue that by broadening the public sphere, Western institutions will serve as bastions of civil society in an otherwise authoritarian political landscape. However, there is considerable evidence that even Western branch universities in the region cannot openly speak on regionally contentious issues. For example, on February 24, 2013, the London School of Economics (LSE)—citing concerns about academic freedom—cancelled a conference on the Arab Spring to be held at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that “very senior” UAE government officials had sought to place restrictions on what could be discussed (Law 2013). Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, co-director of the Kuwait Program at LSE, was detained at the airport in Dubai and sent back to London. Ulrichsen reported that UAE government officials had asked conference organizers to refrain from discussing the opposition movement in Bahrain.

This article concerns the question of whether the expansion of Western universities to the Middle East can accompany an earnest attempt to protect academic freedom. In other words, does academic freedom globalize? I argue that the limited curricular offerings, scarcity of tenure, and absence of organizations to advocate on behalf of faculty restrict academic freedom in unacknowledged ways. Also, branch campuses such as New York University (NYU) Abu Dhabi cater to a slim pool of applicants who can afford the exorbitant tuition. These prestigious branch campuses—which do serve as oases of free speech—are more akin to the high-end Western resort hotels in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where the sale and consumption of alcohol is legal despite strict bans everywhere else. It turns out that academic freedom, much like alcohol, is restricted to only a small group of regional elites and to the increasing number of academic tourists who seek a Western education outside of the West.

There is a growing body of literature on globalization and higher education that documents the degree to which universities around the world conform to the same organizational blueprints (Lindblad and Lindblad 2009). World-society theorists, in particular, provide a compelling account of the global spread of tertiary education and its strong isomorphic tendencies, recognizing that “The same subjects are...taught with the same

perspectives leading to very similar degrees and to credentials that take on world-wide meaning” (Schofer and Meyer 2005, 917). Due to ontological and methodological reasons, however, these studies are unable to account for what transpires inside particular institutions, and they ignore the degree to which academic freedom exists on campus and in the classroom.

Schofer and Meyer assert that universities, much like international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), need to be acknowledged as instruments for the dissemination of world culture because “they produce individuals who study neoclassical economics and wish to work for the [World Trade Organization] WTO, just as they produce sociologists who decry the WTO’s evils. Yet, such people are linked by a (mostly) common cultural freedom” (Schofer and Meyer 2005, 917). My own research on Western universities in the Middle East, particularly in the Cooperation Council for Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) states, questions the assumption that these institutions are largely linked by what Schofer and Meyer call a “common culture of freedom” (Schofer and Meyer 2005). Furthermore, as I argue in this article, critical differences that pertain to protections of academic freedom may not be readily apparent to outside observers. Perhaps more important, academic freedom *as practiced by American universities* is a particularly American institution that does not easily lend itself to export.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM: FROM INTERNALIZATION TO ACADEMIC OUTPOSTS

In the height of the Cold War, noted intellectual and historian Henry Steele Commager argued that the United States was uniquely suited to the task of promoting the global expansion of tertiary education. “We have to do for the new countries,” he argued, “what New England and Virginia did for the American frontier in the earlier period; what Harvard, Yale, and Princeton did to build up colleges and universities in Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois in the early nineteenth century” (Commager 1963, 369). He further stated:

We have a responsibility to transmit to the new institutions which we create or develop not merely the physical facilities but the moral and intellectual characteristics of the university. That means that the American academic community... must represent to the rest of the world the habits of freedom.

It must show by all of its activities and by all of its commitments what can be done to solve problems under a system of freedom. It must show that problems can be solved only if those who work at them are free from improper pressures of politics, religion, ideology. (Commager 1963, 369)

Commager foreshadowed both the expansion of prestigious branch campuses in the Middle East and the call for these institutions to promote democratization by inculcating the “habits of freedom.” The Cold War university, however, was not expansionist—as Commager called for—but rather internalizing, attracting international students to American universities to spread liberal norms and American influence.

The Global War on Terror—and the growing difficulty of attracting students to the United States due to visa and other restrictions—has resulted in a renewed interest in the creation of American branch campuses in the Middle East. Branch university campuses have even been included in American geopolitical strategy, as evinced by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) support for the American University of Kabul in Afghanistan and the American University of Sulaimani in Iraq. Clearly, even more than during the Cold War, externalist education initiatives have become a critical component of US strategy in the Global War on Terror. The US–Middle East Partnership Initiative oversees a budget devoted primarily to education in a variety of forms and designed for students and working professionals (Salime 2010). Despite the robust military presence of the United States in the Middle East, popular demand for American-style education is the primary driving force for the regional diffusion of American higher education institutions (HEIs). From Kyrgyzstan to Qatar, American military installations are located in each country that now hosts an American-affiliated HEI. Furthermore, and importantly, most of these institutions are private revenue-seeking entrepreneurial agents that are not acting at the behest of the US Department of State.

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OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Although American universities in the Middle East have been in operation for more than a century, the recent expansion of branch campuses in the Persian Gulf is unprecedented. As Romani points out, “One important pattern characterizing the current academic boom is a dual process of privatization amidst globalization. Two-thirds (around 70%) of the new universities founded in the Arab Middle East since 1993 are private, and more and more (at least 50) of them are branches of Western, mostly American universities” (Romani 2010, 4). No other region in the world comes close to matching the Persian Gulf with respect to the diffusion of American universities.

The institutions that comprise this “academic boom” fall into three categories: branch campuses, hybrid universities, and independent standalone universities. Branch campuses of institutions based in the United States are the most common. With a student population of 460, NYU Abu Dhabi is a good example of this model (NYU Abu Dhabi 2014). Other than NYU Abu Dhabi, many branch campuses are clustered in compounds; as such, they are relatively small and cater to students who desire specialized academic or vocational training. Education City in Qatar hosts the following branch-campus programs: a fine-arts program administered by Virginia Commonwealth University, a medical school administered by Cornell University, engineering programs administered by Texas A&M, and a division of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service.

The second category consists of international universities that partner with an HEI in the Middle East. For example, in 2008, the University of Texas at Austin announced that it had signed a contract to collaborate with King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in the development of new graduate programs in engineering and earth sciences.

The third category consists of independent standalone universities—locally rooted and locally financed—that offer an American-style education. With approximately 4,800 students, the American University of Sharjah (AUS) and Zayed University in Dubai provide examples of this type. Because of their comparative size and the English-language support services that they offer, American-style universities historically have drawn more students from both the host country and the Middle East region. By comparison, NYU Abu Dhabi—which is required to adhere to the more stringent admissions standards of its New York affiliate—attracts a global student body. American-style universities typically adhere to American curricular standards, embrace the liberal-arts model, use textbooks published in the United States, employ faculty members trained in the United States, and encourage faculty to use American pedagogical techniques.

THE AMERICAN MODEL OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Academic freedom in the United States owes its distinctive character to its particular historical context. Thus, this element of the American model of education is understandably more difficult to reproduce than a set of textbooks or course offerings. Academic freedom and the institutional protections designed to nurture and protect it received formal protections only within the last century. Many of the early debates on academic freedom took place during the Cold War. In 1940, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) agreed to principles supporting academic freedom in teaching and research; the cornerstone for academic freedom was to be

tenure (AAUP 2006, 3). For the leftist wing of the AAUP, which largely favored unionization and a more robust set of measures to protect academic freedom, the agreement on tenure represented a weak compromise (Barrow 1990; Kamola and Meyerhoff 2009). Freedom in the classroom was circumscribed by the stipulation that faculty not stray beyond their expertise and “introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject” (AAUP 2006, 3). The basis for academic freedom, as opposed to free-speech laws, was argued to derive from the professional knowledge, qualifications, and credentials of the university professors (Gerber 2010). Principles including peer review supported the belief that only equally trained and knowledgeable professionals, rather than laymen, were qualified to judge research publications and deliver lectures (Gerber 2010, 8). Notably for this article, religious institutions were given some flexibility to limit freedom in the classroom, as long as the university’s employees were made aware of these limitations when they were hired. In the United States, tenure allowed HEIs to compete more successfully with the private sector for talented faculty who were willing to forgo higher salaries for intellectual freedom and employment security (Kolodny 2008, 3).

American-style universities in the Middle East, in contrast, offer high salaries but limited guarantees of continuous employment in the future, in the hope that financial incentives will be enough to lure established American scholars from the relative safety of tenure. The Kafala system, which binds all foreign workers to a citizen sponsor, limits *all* expatriates to a renewable three-year term of employment (Ali 2010). This system, designed to undercut the bargaining power of low-wage workers by carefully controlling where and how long they work also provides a convenient justification for not extending tenure to the Middle

many of these institutional safeguards do not transfer as readily as other elements of the American model of education. Also, as discussed in the next section, even accreditation agencies have demonstrated an inability to act transnationally in defense of academic freedom.

Although they lack protections afforded by tenure, standalone American-style universities (e.g., AUS) offer a wider spectrum of classes, are more engaged in their communities, and are more likely to teach citizens of the host country. Furthermore, the absence of tenure at standalone campuses does not mean that academic freedom is nonexistent. What is restricted, however, is the ability for academics at American universities to engage with a wider public *off campus*. When I was conducting research for this article, many of the untenured faculty members that I interviewed admitted surprise at the level of freedom they experience in the classroom. However, several also admitted to self-policing, a finding that is supported by a recent survey of university professors in the Middle East region (Romanowski and Nasser 2010). Many instructors expressed concerns about being sensitive to cultural differences and not wanting to offend students who have different worldviews. The instructors that I interviewed developed strategies to broach sensitive topics in the classroom, including “case-obfuscation,” wherein the instructor critically describes human-rights violations in a neighboring country while entertaining the hope that students realize that similar violations are taking place locally. However, the university campus marks the outer boundary beyond which faculty members cannot cross when debating politically, socially, or even environmentally sensitive matters. Thus, there are limits to the argument that American universities can act reliably as INGOs or that they can inculcate, as Commager suggested, “the habits of freedom.”

Furthermore, the absence of tenure at standalone campuses does not mean that academic freedom is nonexistent. What is restricted, however, is the ability for academics at American universities to engage with a wider public off campus.

East region’s growing academic labor force. Branch campuses circumvent these restrictions by drawing tenured faculty from their main campus in the United States. However, standalone private universities (e.g., Zayed University in Dubai and AUS) do not have this luxury. Therefore, they hope that tax-free salaries, supplemented by free or subsidized housing as well as other benefits, are enough to lure expatriate academics from domestic labor markets.

Other than tenure, there are a number of additional safeguards in the United States to protect academic freedom. Chief among them are accreditation agencies, disciplinary associations such as the American Political Science Association, advocacy organizations such as the AAUP, and a normative and legal framework supporting free-speech rights. Although most branch and standalone campuses in the Middle East region are accredited, the institutional phalanx that supports academic freedom in the United States is mostly absent in the Persian Gulf. Clearly,

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE ARAB SPRING

As alluded to in the cancellation of the LSE conference, the Arab Spring has had a particularly chilling effect on the public sphere in the Persian Gulf. In 2012, the UAE closed the offices of the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center (i.e., a polling and research firm) and the German-affiliated Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organization. In 2011, the Gulf Research Center, an independent think tank, was shut down by the UAE. Curiously, most INGOs with branches in the region had originally moved to oil-rich Persian Gulf states for fund-raising purposes. They operate with a skeleton staff and use their presence in the region as a staging ground for humanitarian interventions in neighboring countries. Like so many of the universities that opened branch campuses in the Persian Gulf, their presence in the region is driven more by access to wealthy donors and publicity than advocacy. As such, they pose no direct challenge to the regional governments.

The Arab Spring also engendered a more repressive atmosphere for college campuses in the region. In 2012, a highly acclaimed journalism professor at Zayed University—an accredited American-style university in Dubai—had his contract terminated for “unspecified reasons.” This faculty member had regularly written columns in local papers calling for greater journalistic freedom. In response to public queries, Zayed University’s provost, Larry Wilson, cited the university’s statement on academic freedom, which calls for an environment “characterized by the free flow of information and ideas, in which students can be exposed to a wide range of unfettered points of view...and the need to be respectful of the principles of Islam and the values of the United Arab Emirates” (Nelson 2012). By citing the need to be sensitive to Islam, the university’s position is formally consistent with the principles laid out by the joint 1940 AAUP and AACU declaration on academic freedom, which controversially included a loophole that restricted academic freedom at religious institutions.

When contacted by *Inside Higher Ed* about the incident at Zayed University, a representative of the Middle States Accreditation Agency noted that “If there’s evidence that this was not the university’s doing, but rather the government’s doing, that probably would not impact their accreditation” (Nelson 2012). This case demonstrates the importance of the extra-institutional forces and constraints under which American universities in the Middle East operate. However, the case also suggests that accreditation agencies—the only transnational regulatory bodies with the authority to enforce academic freedom—lack the power to effectively protect this key component of the American model of education (Noori 2013). The Zayed University case similarly reflects the limits of the argument that universities can act as civil-society agents in an otherwise politically repressive environment. American-style universities such as Zayed provide some protections for academic freedom; however, when faculty members try to make their voice heard outside the confines of campus, they risk severe sanctions. Expulsions such as the one referenced previously are not a frequent occurrence, but they happen often enough to create a climate of wariness for untenured faculty members.

In conclusion, academic freedom in the Middle East exists but within quite profound limits. Clearly, academic freedom does not globalize as readily as other elements of the American model of education. Because the international desire for

American-style and branch campuses remains strong, it is important to question the taken-for-granted belief that these institutions can reliably safeguard academic freedom—whether inside or outside of the classroom. ■

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