



September 2022

Greetings from Washington,

"There are two equalizers in life: the internet and education," said John Chambers, former Cisco Systems Chairman and CEO. And history has proven him right. Education has been a key indicator of an economy's growth in innovation and technology for the last 500 years from the Dutch Empire in the mid-17th century to the British Empire in the late 19th century to the United States in the 20th century to China's awakening in the last several decades. Investment in education has been the foundation of societal and economic transformation and has led to significant long-term gains.

One of the most remarkable examples from recent history is the rise of Singapore. This small country of approximately 6 million people went from a GDP per capita of \$500 in 1965, the year of its independence, to one of the highest in the world today at \$72,000. While many factors contributed to this astonishing growth, there is little doubt that former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's relentless focus on educating his people significantly impacted the nation's economic boom. He often remarked that his strategy was "to develop Singapore's only available natural resource: its people."

But is higher spending on education a key determinant of successful learning outcomes? Not necessarily. While educational funding in MENA differs by country, spending is not necessarily correlated to results. In international assessments of learning outcomes, most participating countries in the MENA region performed at the bottom, and all MENA countries were below the center point of 500. Saudi Arabia, which spends as much as OECD nations on education, scores lower on every measure at every grade level. Clearly, higher spending does not necessarily lead to better learning outcomes; however, effective teachers and curriculums are vital for achieving good outcomes. Hence Saudi's considerable transformation of its educational system is focused on its educators as well as the curriculum and its alignment with the strategic goals and objectives of the nation's Vision 2030.

Saudi Arabia is not alone. Egypt is implementing an extensive reform program focused on its curriculum and teachers with the help of the World Bank's Supporting Egypt Education Reform Project. Jordan and others in the region are embarking on similar reforms. Moreover, technology plays an increasingly important role in all of these programs. Technology is increasing efficiency and access while reducing costs from digital content to improving education delivery to student and teacher assessments. Best of all, technology is making education scalable and leveling the playing field for many, especially those with limited resources.

These initiatives are laudable and should positively impact learning outcomes in the future; however, they do not solve a more immediate problem: the significant mismatch between skills and available jobs (especially in high-growth areas of technology, green energy, and healthcare). As with many outdated education systems globally, regional systems were built for jobs of the past and not the future. And in a fast-paced global economy where information is infinite and immediate, learning must become more dynamic and flexible. This issue is more acute in a region where most economies are fighting for economic diversification and foreign direct investment. If the skills gap is not plugged in the short term, we will witness negative feedback loops that could reverse early gains. For example, while venture capital funding increased over 2x to reach \$2.6 billion in 2021, there is a danger that if companies do not build competitive products and services and scale due to the lack of talent, that funding may eventually decline, slowing the momentum of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Bridging the skill gap immediately while education reform continues apace is essential to achieving national goals for many MENA countries.

**Amjad Ahmad**  
Chairman, empowerME  
Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East  
Atlantic Council

**Season 3 of empowerME Conversations podcast is live**

Season 3 of the [empowerME Conversations](#) podcast, hosted by empowerME Chairman [Amjad Ahmad](#), focuses on top government officials driving regional economic growth, featuring corporate guest co-hosts. This season is sponsored by UPS.



**Episode 1: Palestine**

Featuring Palestine Minister of State for Entrepreneurship and Empowerment H.E. **Osama Al Saadawi** and guest co-host Ibtikar Fund Managing General Partner **Habib Hazzan**.

[View Episode](#)

**Episode 2: Egypt**

Featuring Egypt Minister of International Cooperation H.E. **Rania Al-Mashat** and guest co-host UPS President of International Public Affairs and Sustainability **Penelope Naas**.

[View Episode](#)

**Big Data**



Graph: [PwC](#)

**Amman-Baghdad-Cairo (ABC) Agreement: A new path for economic integration**



The Atlantic Council's [empowerME Initiative](#) and [Iraq Initiative](#) have launched their newest report: [Amman-Baghdad-Cairo \(ABC\) Agreement: A new path for economic integration](#). This report is authored by empowerME Director [Racha Helwa](#), Manaseer Group Vice President [Ibrahim Saif](#), and Iraqi Economists Network Founder and Coordinator [Barik Schuber](#). The report assesses the outcomes of recent summits between Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan that focus on trilateral agreements aimed at deepening economic integration, presenting possible pitfalls and potential benefits of strengthening economic ties between the three nations, with each country's perspective represented.

[Read Full Report](#)

**Upcoming Event**

Atlantic Council  
RAFIK HARRI CENTER  
FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

empowerME

**THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE MENA REGION**

Tuesday, October 4 | 11:00 a.m. (ET)

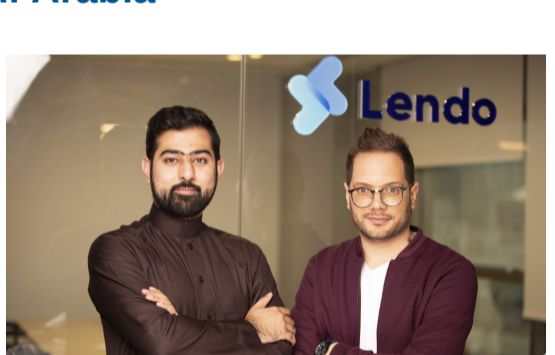
#ACempowerME

On **Tuesday, October 4th** from **11:00 am – 12:15 pm ET**, the Atlantic Council's empowerME Initiative will hold a virtual event prior to COP 27 in Egypt featuring keynote speaker Columbia University Director of the Center for Sustainable Development [Jeffrey Sachs](#) alongside Arab Republic of Egypt Ministry of Environment Minister [H.E. Yasmine Fouad](#), COP 28 UAE Organizing Team Executive Vice President [Ambassador Majid Al-Suwaidi](#), United Nations Special Envoy on Financing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [Mahmoud Mohieldin](#), United Nations Development Program Special Advisor to the Administrator [Mourad Wahba](#), and The Rockefeller Foundation Deputy Chief of Staff and Vice President [Eric Pelofsky](#). The conversation will be moderated by empowerME Director [Racha Helwa](#).

[Register](#)

**Entrepreneurs of the Month: Osama AlRae and Mohamed Jawabri Lendo - Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Entrepreneurs Osama AlRae and Mohamed Jawabri are revolutionizing financing for SMEs through their FinTech startup Lendo! Watch our short video to learn more.



[Watch short video](#)

**In case you missed it...**



**Egypt is hosting COP27. What are the expectations?**

By [Lama El-Hatouy](#)

[Read more](#)

**Previous Event**

Atlantic Council  
RAFIK HARRI CENTER  
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empowerME

Georgetown University McDonough Program for the Study of Islam and Muslim Societies

**REGULATIONS AND LAWS IN SAUDI ARABIA IMPACTING WOMEN IN BUSINESS**

SPONSORED BY  
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empowerME held a workshop on regulations and legal structures that impact women in business in Saudi Arabia and the wider MENA region featuring Monsha'at Women Entrepreneurship Department Director [Afnan Ababtain](#), Albright Stonebridge Group GCC Regional Manager [Imad Al-Abdulqader](#), and PepsiCo Saudi Arabia General Counsel [Yara A. AlZouman](#). The Cohen Group Associate Vice President [Jaime Stansbury](#) moderated the conversation.

[Watch Event](#)

**Big Question**

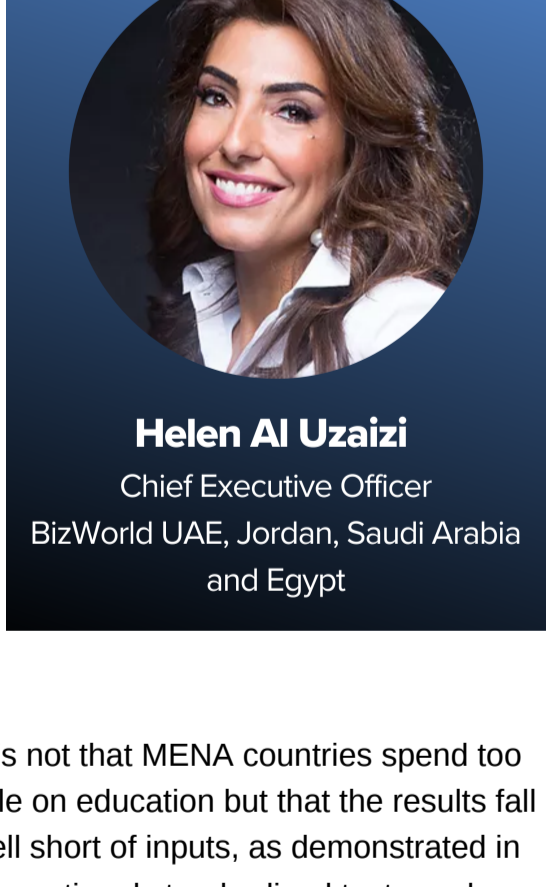
**Investment in human development, including education, is a pre-determinant for economic growth; however, public spending on education in most MENA countries is relatively modest and the education system needs improvement. How can MENA countries enhance their educational systems to close the technology and innovation gap with global leaders?**



**Omar Al-Ubaydli**  
Director of Research  
Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (Derasat)

"MENA countries should enhance their educational systems by establishing and institutionalizing a relationship between education policy and education research conducted by homegrown MENA scholars. Policies need to be informed by professional scholarship, and scholars should be allowed to scientifically reflect upon existing policies. This requires maximal sharing of education data with the homegrown scholars, and accountability for education policymakers."

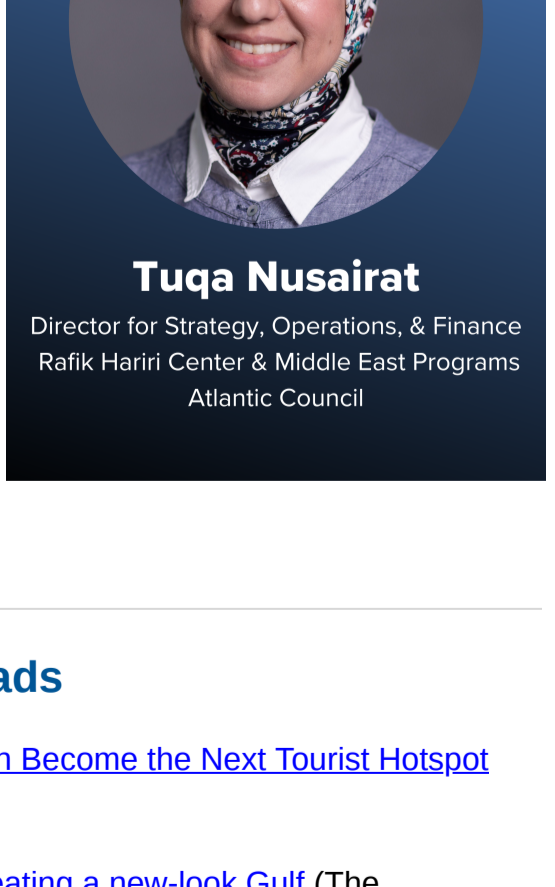
"The answer is simple; rather than looking to invest heavily in technologies and platforms, which many developing countries and governments may not be able to afford, we need to invest in skills. Education needs to focus on how to think innovatively, building an entrepreneurial mind-set of risk taking, critical thinking, curiosity, exploration, and creativity. Access to information is one click away and having worked in refugee camps, IB schools, and public schools in the region, it is clear that teaching children the right skills is a game changer and can transform the way the world of education evolves."



**Helen Al Uzaizi**  
Chief Executive Officer  
BizWorld UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt

"It's not that MENA countries spend too little on education but that the results fall well short of inputs, as demonstrated in international standardized tests such as PISA and TIMSS. Often the Gulf states that spend the most per capita are the worst laggards; meanwhile, Gaza, which relies on UNRWA schools, has among the highest literacy rates in the region. The governmental and societal deficits identified by Arab experts in UNDP-funded studies earlier in this century are still extant and inextricably linked to the shortfalls in education and most other indicators of national well-being."

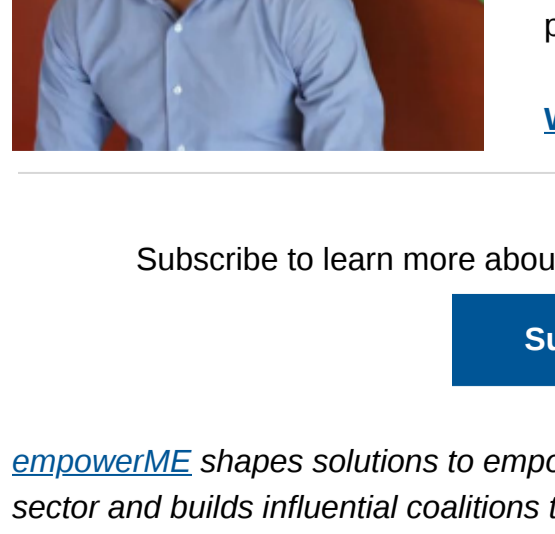
"There's a growing gap between public and private education in the MENA at the K-12 level, which is a larger manifestation of deep economic inequality across the region. Wealth and economic opportunity more often do not reach populations outside capitals and major cities, leaving middle and lower income families to rely on subpar public education systems that do not build the skills needed for Arab students to compete against their international peers. The 2022 Arab Human Development Report highlights the high cost of private education in the region as a hurdle to obtaining quality education for many."



**Tuqa Nusairat**  
Director for Strategy, Operations, & Finance  
Rafik Hariri Center & Middle East Programs  
Atlantic Council

**Big Reads**

- [Saudi Arabia Is Betting \\$1 Trillion It Can Become the Next Tourist Hotspot](#) (The Wall Street Journal)
- [An energy crisis and geopolitics are creating a new look Gulf](#) (The Economist)
- [UAE has taken the lead on net zero as rest of Gulf plays catch-up](#) (Arab Gulf Business Insight)
- [From tea to cars, Egypt and Tunisia struggle to pay for imports](#) (The Economist)



**Learn about empowerME**

empowerME is changing the conversation about the Middle East by focusing on economic prosperity. Watch this video to learn more about empowerME and its unique chairman, regional venture capital pioneer Amjad Ahmad.

[WATCH VIDEO](#)

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*empowerME Shapes solutions to empower entrepreneurs, women, and the private sector and builds influential coalitions to drive regional economic integration, prosperity, and job creation.*

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