

Greetings from Washington.

Brain drain is a common phenomenon in the global south, where highly educated and skilled individuals leave their native home to a more favorable location with better employment, development, and career prospects elsewhere. While brain drain is largely common in the developing world, including Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, it is particularly significant in the Arab World.

The Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) is **populated** with approximately 381 million people spanning across twenty-one countries. **Sixty percent** of the population in the MENA region is under the age of thirty, and about **thirty percent** of this young population continue to leave their countries in search for better opportunities in the western sphere. The top country with brain flights from the MENA region is **Syria**, since the war has driven most of the country's talented population out. Although the human flight and brain drain **index** also includes other conflict-affected countries, such as Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, the list also includes relatively politically stable countries like Morocco (second highest from MENA in terms of brain flight), Tunisia (sixth highest from MENA), Jordan (eighth highest from MENA), and Egypt (ninth highest from MENA).

So, what are the main factors driving MENA's youth population to leave? The primary cause is youth unemployment. Youth unemployment rates in the MENA region have been the highest in the world over the past twenty-five years, reaching **30 percent** in 2017, compared to **13 percent** globally. Given the increased political instability in the region over the past decade, policymakers have reduced their focus on youth unemployment, prioritizing security and political concerns ahead of economic reforms. The highest rates of youth unemployment regionally are in Palestine (**63 percent**), Jordan (**36 percent**), and Tunisia (**28 percent**). A recent study by the Arab League's Department of Population and Migration Policies found that high unemployment rates in the Middle East were responsible for **70 percent** of university graduate brain flights.

The second main cause is education. It is not coincidental that the same countries with the highest levels of brain flight in the region also provide the lowest levels of public spending on education and research. Due to their limited fiscal space and high levels of debt to GDP, government spending on education and research is limited to **2.5 percent** of GDP in Egypt and **3.2 percent** in Jordan. Most of the migrating talents from the MENA region are also from the high-skill sectors, including medicine and engineering, where research-based career opportunities are virtually absent. Accordingly, most destination countries for highly skilled migrants from MENA are in Europe and North America, where research capital and prospects in advanced science fields are very robust.

The third reason behind the departure of MENA youth is the low average real wage, which not only is lower than the global average, but has also been in **decline** since 2014, according to ILO statistics. Many of the talented professionals from the middle-income MENA countries depart to work in the Gulf States, where average pay is higher, in addition to the higher quality of life that is mostly driven by political and social stability. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar are witnessing a "brain gain" phenomenon, where an average of **70 percent** of the working population is based on emigrants, including from MENA countries.

So, what can MENA policy makers do to retain talent? First, policy makers need to continue to promote private sector development to create jobs, especially in the SME and labor intensive sectors. Second, prioritizing research and innovation is key to retaining the highly-skilled and ambitious talents in MENA countries. Improving public spending on education, facilitating public private partnership (PPP) projects, and developing the education-tech ecosystem can also help retain talent. Third, labor law reforms in the middle-income MENA economies, such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, and the initiation of minimum wage schemes that are also in line with international benchmarks, can help create incentives for the young population to remain.

Sincerely,  
Racha Helwa  
Director, empowerME  
Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East  
Atlantic Council

**2023 Win Fellowship Roadshow**



Congratulations to our top five performing Win Fellows who have been selected to participate in a roadshow trip to the United States! The Win Fellowship roadshow is led by the Atlantic Council's empowerME Initiative in cooperation with Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business with support from US Embassy Riyadh, UPS, and PepsiCo. The Win Fellowship Roadshow participants were chosen from a highly competitive cohort of more than thirty applicants, receiving a fully sponsored trip to the United States for leadership training at Georgetown and meetings with US business and government leaders. Learn more about the five participants and stay updated on their trip [here!](#)

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**Upcoming Conversation**

On Thursday, March 2, the Atlantic Council will host a **Twitter Space** conversation with the **empowerME** team's **Win Fellows**. The five fellows, **Meyca Alaudin**, **Rawan Al-Kharboosh**, **Renad Al-Jefri**, **Sumayah Alzamil**, and **Sara Brikadei** will discuss their experiences of being women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabi and their times as Win Fellows. This discussion will be moderated by Chairman of the empowerME Initiative, **Amjad Ahmad**.

[Listen Here](#)

**Upcoming Event**

The Atlantic Council's empowerME Initiative will hold a hybrid panel discussion with its Win Fellowship Roadshow participants on **Thursday, March 2, from 3:00 - 4:30 pm ET / 11:00 pm - 12:30 am KSA**. This conversation will be with the participants of the Win Fellowship Roadshow to hear their inspiring entrepreneurial stories and learn how they are becoming an economic force in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East Region.

[Register](#)

**2023 Inaugural Rafik Hariri Awards and Tenth Anniversary Gala**

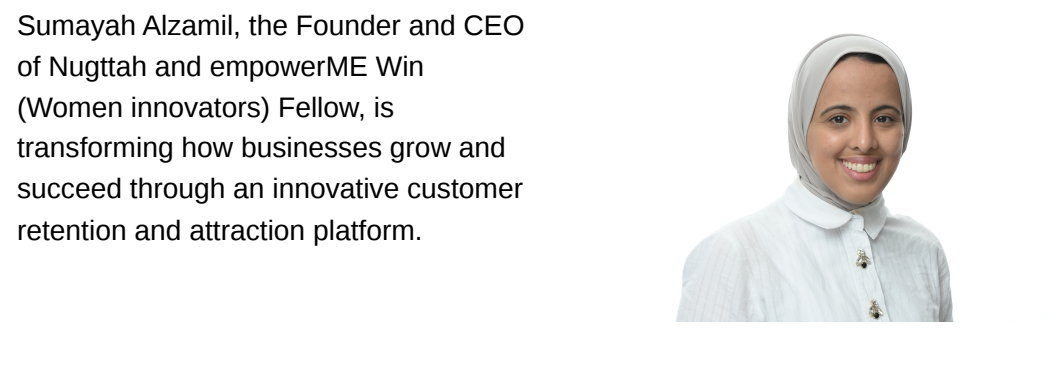


On February 14th, the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East hosted the inaugural Rafik Hariri Awards at a gala dinner at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. As the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center celebrates its tenth anniversary, the awards honored outstanding figures from the Middle East and North Africa who embody the center's values and vision.

Among the Rafik Hariri Award recipients were Sir **Magdi Yacoub**, founder of the Magdi Yacoub Global Heart Foundation, Magdi Yacoub Foundation, and Chain of Hope for the Social Impact Award; **Fatma Said**, award-winning soprano for the Artistic Excellence Award; **Ahmad Abu Ghazaleh**, executive vice chairman of Abdali Hospital for the Business Leadership Award; and the late **Dame Zaha Hadid**, international award-winning architect Special Tribute Award.

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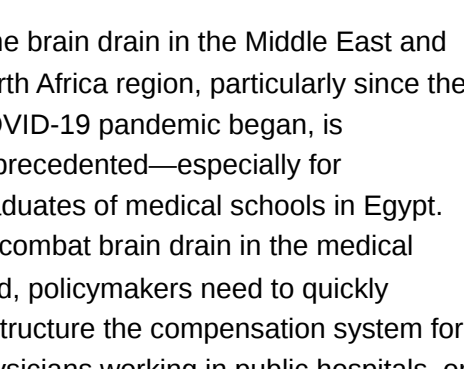
**Big Data:**



Source: [McKinsey & Company](#)

**Entrepreneur of the Month: Sumayah Alzamil Nugtah - Saudi Arabia**

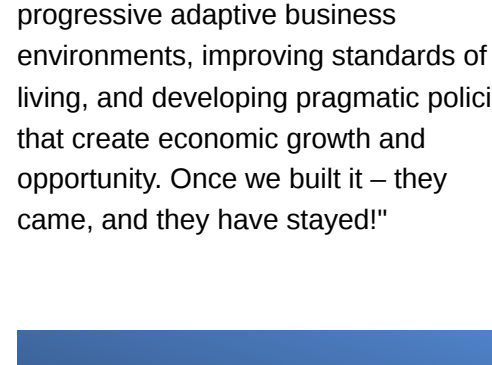
Sumayah Alzamil, the Founder and CEO of Nugtah and empowerME Win (Women innovators) Fellow, is transforming how businesses grow and succeed through an innovative customer retention and attraction platform.



[Watch Video](#)

**Big Question**

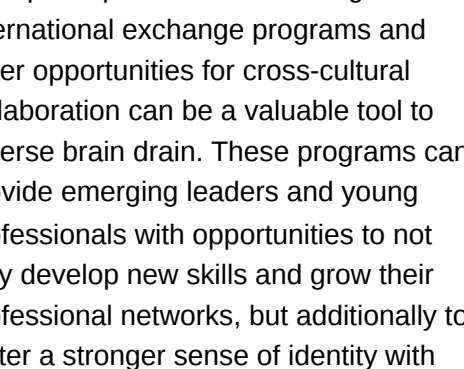
**How can policy makers in the MENA region create incentives to reverse brain drain?**



**Laila El Baradei**  
Professor of Public Administration  
The American University in Cairo

"The brain drain in the Middle East and North Africa region, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic began, is unprecedented—especially for graduates of medical schools in Egypt. To combat brain drain in the medical field, policymakers need to quickly restructure the compensation system for physicians working in public hospitals, or else we will not find anybody working in these hospitals soon."

"The UAE's focus has been on "brain gain"—attracting talents from across the region. According to the Arab Youth Survey (2022), 57 percent of young Arabs chose the UAE when asked where they would most like to live. Our formula is simple: work on elements that make people want to stay in the UAE, such as: creating jobs, fostering progressive adaptive business environments, improving standards of living, and developing pragmatic policies that create economic growth and opportunity. Once we built it—they came, and they have stayed!"



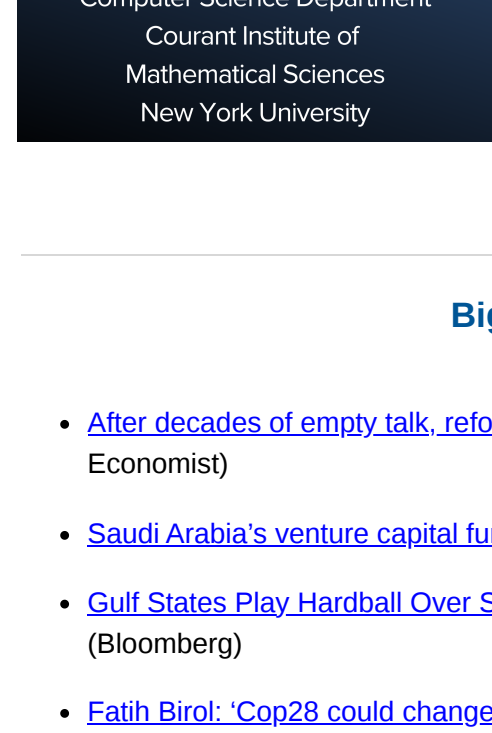
**Shaima Gargash**  
Deputy Chief of Mission  
Embassy of the United Arab Emirates  
Washington, DC

"The participation in and funding of international exchange programs and other opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration can be a valuable tool to reverse brain drain. These programs can provide emerging leaders and young professionals with opportunities to not only develop new skills and grow their professional networks, but additionally to foster a stronger sense of identity with their home countries. By participating in these programs, individuals can enhance their expertise in relevant fields, while also promoting cross-cultural mutual understanding. In this way, talented individuals can gain the tools and networks they need to stay in the region and contribute to its development."

"The first imperative for policy makers is to create opportunities for the educated, entrepreneurial mindsets to return to work and invest back in the region. Creating opportunities is essential, as talent flows naturally to countries—and companies—that create an environment for economic growth; make life easy for enterprise; attract and welcome investment; and nurture a culture of achievement. Interventions that have proven successful are drastically improving the ease of doing business, networking with the diaspora of talent that has left in past years and offering incentives to return, improving living quality, and devoting resources to education—particularly in areas relevant to enabling research, development, and entrepreneurship."



**Samar Nassar**  
Managing Director - Healthcare  
Ministry of Investment  
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

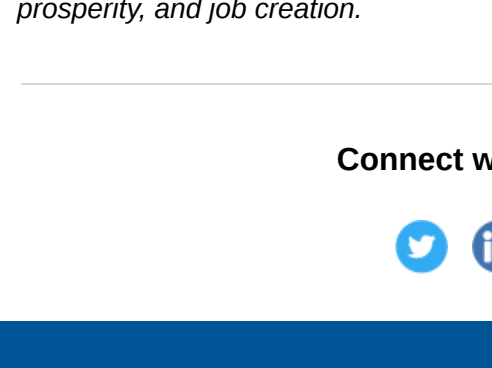


**Mohamed Zahrán**  
Computer Science Department  
Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences  
New York University

"Competent people move to a place where they can have: easy access to the resources needed to do their jobs, better quality of life, and fair compensation. Policy makers often target the last point only. However, easy access to resources needed for the job, whether the job is research, educational, or entrepreneurial, means way less bureaucracy for paperwork and export of material and less corruption. Quality of life is a long-term goal that needs a clear plan. Policy makers in the MENA region need to fight bureaucracy, corruption, and ensure fairness both in compensation and recognition. This has to be built in the DNA of governments."

**Big Reads**

- [After decades of empty talk, reforms in Gulf states are real—but risky](#) (The Economist)
- [Saudi Arabia's venture capital funding nears \\$1 billion mark](#) (Arab News)
- [Gulf States Play Handball Over Sending Billions to Rescue Egypt](#) (Bloomberg)
- [Fath Birel: 'Con28 could change the destiny of Middle Eastern economies'](#) (The National News)



**Learn about empowerME**  
empowerME is existing by focusing on the Middle East by concentrating 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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