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Modern Education in the Arabian Peninsula: Social Dynamics and Political Issues

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L'éducation dans la péninsule Arabique durant la première moitié du XXe siècle

Introduction

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Introduction

Juliette Honvault and Talal Al-Rashoud

- 1 While the contemporary history of the Arabian Peninsula, which has long been the poor cousin of general works on the Middle East, has aroused new interest in the past few years, this has not been the case for the history of education. The recent issue of the French journal *Histoire de l'Éducation*, devoted to the Middle East from the end of the 19th century to the present day, was no exception. It essentially offered a renewed reading of new aspects of education in Egypt and Lebanon, the two major centers of modern Arab education between the end of the 19th century and the end of the 1970s.¹ It also geographically broadened this regional history by taking into account two areas administered by the British in the 20th century: Sudan and the Mandates given by the League of Nations to Great Britain (Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq). However, there is apparently still resistance to the incorporation of the countries of the Arabian Peninsula into regional analyses of the history of education.
- 2 Contrary to popular belief, the Arabian Peninsula was not an educational desert closed to the world until it was saved by the influx of oil wealth in the 1950s and 1960s. Admittedly, there can be no question of attempting a comparison with the Egyptian educational system, born following a reform movement that started in 1867, and which centered around the Egyptian university created in 1908 under the patronage of King Fu'ād I (and became public in 1925), the generalization of free education in 1949, and its compulsory nature in 1951.² During the first half of the 20th century, the Islamic educational system of the peninsula, organized around Koranic schools (*madrasas*, *kuttābs*, and *ribāṭs*, i.e. places to learn to read and write in order to memorize the Koran) and centers of high religious culture such as Mecca or Zabīd in Yemen, constituted the core of the educational world. These institutions were sometimes affected by the debates on the Islamic reformism which influenced scholars' circles in Southeast Asia or Cairo.³
- 3 In contrast to the Arab regions around the Mediterranean, the Peninsula was less affected by the 19th-century European religious missions, which made education a major tool for their integration into local societies,⁴ or by the development of the Ottoman educational system.⁵ However, it was not completely immune to these

influences. In Aden, where the first missionary school was created in 1856, there were about twenty primary and secondary schools in 1921, managed by the British government, Christian missions (including a girls' school run by the Danish mission),⁶ or community-based organisations (Iranian, Indian, Somali, etc.).⁷ Missionary enterprises were fewer in the Gulf region, though the Reform Church in America operated schools in Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait from 1890, 1896 and 1912 respectively.⁸ In Hejaz and Yemen, the best known modern school model at this time was certainly the Ottoman. Further afield, British India, the American University of Beirut, and even the prestigious London schools attracted the sons of merchant families and some ruling elites, such as the Sultan of Oman.

- 4 This diverse educational world has not attracted much attention from historians. Islamic teaching⁹ is only barely mentioned in some autobiographical accounts, which are generally very critical of a teaching system that is considered to be a tool for the sustainability of the old regimes. It has attracted little interest from researchers apart from a few who worked on the transnational dimensions of contemporary religious education.¹⁰ So-called “modern” teaching has, of course, left traces in contemporary historiography, in works dealing with the formation of the modern states, descriptive monographs, or expert reports intended to meet the needs of planning policies, or even, in the specific case of Yemen, of international development aid.¹¹ But it very often appears only as a marginal phenomenon, too exceptional to be considered as dynamic before the movement towards mass education in the years 1960–1970.
- 5 Historical studies on education in the peninsula are, however, emerging. They aim to better understand private educational institutions and their actors, function, orientations, audiences, the challenges of their development, and their role in building political, communal and activist demands and solidarities. This new scholarly trend devotes more focused attention to the actors of state institutions and their place and role in the political and organizational developments behind the formation of the young states of the peninsula. This issue of *Arabian Humanities* broadly showcases this new work. Invited to draw upon new sources in a context where access to national archives is complicated or not very profitable, its authors have opened new boxes of archives outside the peninsula, in England, Egypt and Iran. They also explored novel local sources, such as the regional press and private archives. Furthermore, they conducted interviews, confirming the centrality of a biographical approach and individual itineraries to a detailed understanding of the development of modern education in the region, before the states thoroughly took over and expanded this sector in the 1960s.
- 6 The six selected articles offer geographic and temporal coherence conducive to comparison on the peninsular scale – unfortunately excluding Qatar, for which no proposal was presented to the editors. Eschewing quantitative analysis, they show the dynamics that anticipated the establishment of educational systems, and which were in each case products of specific historical processes.
- 7 Almost all the countries of the region are taken here in the same light, embracing various political situations. The issue includes papers on the two states whose independence largely preceded international recognition: Imamite Yemen after the Ottoman withdrawal in 1918–1920, and the state of Ibn Sa‘ūd, already almost formed in its final geopolitical configuration after the conquest of the Hejaz in 1925. Elsewhere, along almost all the coasts of the peninsula, the British authorities dominated the small

emirates and sultanates, but the protection agreements which governed their relations with the local authorities did not everywhere produce the same political realities. Relatively inconsistent in Kuwait, British influence was more marked in Bahrain, the Trucial States (future United Arab Emirates) and Oman, while Aden, initially managed by the Anglo-Indian authorities of Bombay, became a British Crown colony in 1937. However, the British authorities were mostly little concerned with matters of education. They limited their own initiatives (integrated into the imperial education system) to the needs of their administration and trade (as in Aden), while “native” education was not very regulated, and its management was ceded to the local authorities. This left space for a variety of actors, including merchants, *‘ulamā’*, and even other Arab governments to instigate and influence the development of education.

The challenges of education in the formation of the states of the peninsula

- 8 Everywhere, the education sector asserted itself from the 1920s as one of the most obvious jurisdictions of the developing states. Dedicated administrations were created: in 1926 Saudi Arabia formed the *Mudīriyyat al-Ma’ārif al-‘Uūmiyya* (General Directorate of Knowledge),¹² and in the 1930s Yemen established *Dā’irat al-Ma’ārif* (the Department of Education). The same development occurred in territories under British protection, as in Bahrain as early as 1919–1920 (*Lajnat al-Ma’ārif*, the Educational Committee),¹³ and in Kuwait in 1936 (*Majlis al-Ma’ārif*, the Educational Council).¹⁴
- 9 Despite these initiatives, “modern” education remained generally limited, with a minimum of institutions until the 1950s–1960s. National historiographies often highlight the political reasons for these restrictions: sometimes it was a question of preventing the formation of a politicized youth critical of regimes, such as in Yemen, Oman or Aden before 1937. In other cases, the most conservative local circles were hostile to possible foreign interference (as in Saudi Arabia, but also Bahrain and Kuwait to a lesser extent). There was also a limited demand, with large segments of society engaged in economic activities (e.g. pearling or pastoralism) that did not provide the sedentary lifestyle necessary to pursue a modern education. Financial and organizational impediments were also central. When Aden became a British colony in 1937, the colonial authorities adopted a policy of development through education, leading to the immediate creation of a school for the sons of tribal *shaykhs*. However, the insufficient teaching resources available in the empire hindered this policy. It was not until 1948 that a teacher training school was created, while a secondary school, Aden College, and a technical institute were not founded until 1956. In Saudi Arabia, where King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Sa‘ūd aspired to create a modern state, the governmental educational effort was especially apparent, with 49 schools established in the kingdom by 1936. However, the lack of financial resources hampered this project until the end of the 1930s, and more clearly after the Second World War (Ochsenwald).
- 10 In some cases, the leaders therefore sought to strengthen official control over Islamic education, whether to put it at the service of the rather limited needs of local administrations, or more simply for purposes of political control. This was the case in Yemen, where Aḥmad Muḥammad Nu‘mān had to close his school because of its curricula, as Ṣ. al-Ṣafwānī mentions. In Saudi Arabia, as N. Samin shows, the Wahhabi scholars acquired great influence over education through their educational activities,

which were part of a broader missionary project to subdue populations that were reluctant to accept the authority of Emir Ibn Sa'ūd. As a result, the *'ulamā'* directly competed with the Ministry of Education on the eve of the oil boom through their control over the Administration of Colleges and Religious Institutes.

Rethinking the actors of modern education: trading communities and religious scholars

- 11 At the beginning of the 20th century, merchant and religious networks frequently intersected, as the *'ulamā'* were themselves frequent travelers. The role of commercial circles in the creation of the first modern private schools in the Persian Gulf has been examined in the historical literature. In Kuwait, the Mubārakīyya School was created in 1911 by merchants of primarily Najdi background with links to Bombay and Basra,¹⁵ while in Bahrain the Madrasat al-'Ajam of Manama was founded in 1913 by merchant circles linked to Iran. As pointed out by L. Stephenson, the influence of merchants on the Bahraini leaders was also crucial to the creation of the first modern school on the island of al-Muḥarraḡ, the Madrasat al-Hidāya al-Khalifīyya, in 1921. Mathematics, and in some cases geography, were taught as essential tools for the commercial world, while English, despite the British domination of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, was more slowly introduced to the curricula. The Mubārakīyya did not teach English because of the resistance from conservatives, which was a major factor that drove the modernist *'ulamā'* to form their own school in 1921, al-Aḥmadiyya.
- 12 The exploitation of new historical sources – notably the Indian Persian-language press and official Iranian archives – allows L. Stephenson to reconsider these previously under-documented school experiences. In particular, she highlights the way in which the Iranian school modernization movement that began in the early 20th century affected Shi'i Persian-speaking merchants in Kuwait and Bahrain (the *'Ajam*) and encouraged them to create modern schools. Their interaction with Sunni communities of Iranian origin underlines the pan-Islamic and interfaith nature of these first schools, which responded to the realities of social demand for education. The ties of these schools with Iran strengthened with the growth of the national movement supported by Reza Shah, transforming their primary identity.
- 13 We find this same confessional and cultural diversity in Oman where, between 1945 and the end of the 1960s, around twenty schools were created by merchants from the Lawātiyya community in the city of Maṭraḡ alone. Through examining some of these schools, N. al-Ṣaqrī shows clearly that it was the social diversity of this very commercial city that allowed them to develop educational activities that were essential to the trade of the sultanate as a whole. Maṭraḡ, which played host to ethnically and religiously diverse communities (Arabs, Indians, Baluchis, Africans and Persians), did not present the same political danger to the Sultan as Muscat with its Sunni and Ibadi elites. This allowed the Lawātiyya, linked to the Shiite communities of India, to develop modern schools to meet the needs of commerce without developing a politicized discourse on Oman other than that of its Islamic identity.
- 14 The religious scholars who participated in these modern educational enterprises were influenced by Islamic reformism, whose promoters and works circulated on both sides of the peninsula through ties to Java or Cairo. Established in port cities or linked to

trading companies, modernist *'ulamā'* prompted local political elites to take an interest in education, sometimes all the more easily as they included personalities with prestigious genealogies, such as the Hadrami *'ulamā'* in the Hejaz.¹⁶ In Aden, as S. al-Ṣafwānī shows, they took part in the local debate, through the press and literary clubs, to affirm the need to develop education for local Muslims, who missed employment opportunities despite the dynamic activity of the port. It was in this environment that the first private modern school in Aden was created in 1931, which then served as a model for a young religious scholar from neighboring North Yemen, Aḥmad Muḥammad Nu'mān, who later became a central figure in the Yemeni republican and national movement. His school, which he created in 1934 in his village, relied on the Adeni network, and allowed him, for a time, to promote the idea of educational reform among some of the ruling elites of the Imamate. Subsequently, while at al-Azhar University in Cairo, he almost single-handedly organized the first Yemeni student mission to Egypt between 1939 and 1941. It was therefore from within the religious scholarly milieu, but in social contexts linked to the commercial world, that openness to the secular sciences emerged. As such, the participation of *'ulamā'* in the secularization of teaching, and even in introducing modern pedagogies (e.g. through sport, theater, and discussion and debate in class), challenges the idea that “forces of change” fought against the “forces of tradition” during the expansion of education from the 1960s.¹⁷

Peninsular dynamics of Arab cooperation

- 15 The educational sector was an essential factor in the integration of the peninsula at the regional level. The articles in this issue obviously confirm that schools contributed significantly to connecting the peninsula to the major capitals of the Arab East, Cairo and – to a lesser extent – Baghdad, Beirut and Jerusalem. These metropolises, from which the calls for Islamic and Arab unity were launched, became great centers for the diffusion of education from the 1930s. In 1936, the Palestinian Supreme Muslim Council sent its first teachers to help set up the Kuwaiti education system. The same year in Egypt, just after the country's formal independence, calls began for the country to assume its regional leadership by welcoming Arab students. Alongside other states such as Iraq and Lebanon, it provided scholarships (full or partial) to increasing numbers of students from the states of the Arabian Peninsula.
- 16 These policies of educational cooperation were very favorably received in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and to a lesser extent in Bahrain. They were supported in particular by the many Syrian, Iraqi or Egyptian educational advisers hired by the authorities (particularly influential in Saudi Arabia as underlined by W. Ochsenwald), even if they sometimes encountered local resistance (as described by N. Samin).
- 17 Elsewhere, the rejection or limited acceptance of Arab educational assistance had dramatic repercussions for the *ṭullāb* – the young people “in search of science”. This was apparent in Oman, where Sultan Sa'īd b. Taymūr did not allow young people who studied abroad to return to the country, and in Yemen, where Imam Yaḥyā only accepted two student missions (to the Baghdad military academy in 1935 and to Lebanon and Egypt in 1947).¹⁸ Few sought to leave these countries (N. al-Ṣaqrī), and those who tried faced unexpected administrative difficulties. The need for a passport, at a time when the borders of states were consolidating, constituted an obstacle that

was difficult to overcome, especially in Yemen where they were rarely issued (Ş. al-Şafwānī). The same was true for school diplomas and knowledge of a European language, which were essential for access to the new standardized institutions of higher education. Official papers could be bypassed and forged, but it was more difficult for knowledge of English, which was, for example, essential to enter the American University of Beirut, the main Lebanese institution to welcome Arab and Muslim students until the 1950s. This was also the case in Cairo University, which selected students based on this criterion, thus penalizing Yemenis from the outset, forcing them to enroll instead in secondary school or the Islamic University of al-Azhar.

- 18 These obstacles to the mobility of young people led to prolonged, even permanent, emigration and, on the local level, contributed to the emergence of political demands, particularly of an anti-colonial and Arab nationalist nature. This was the case in Aden, in particular, where in 1961 the “professor” Aḥmad Nu‘mān initiated the creation of the first school offering Arab Muslims from the British colony – as well as young Yemenis crossing the border from the Imamate – modern education up to secondary level (al-Şafwānī).
- 19 Kuwait, for its part, became a hotbed of political and anti-colonial activism in the 1950s. T. Al-Rashoud shows to what extent this particular context, nourished by the presence of Algerian, Omani, and Adeni militants, provoked an unprecedented educational dynamic in the emirate in the lead-up to independence in 1961. Arab cooperation was reversed, with Kuwait in turn welcoming, at its own expense, students from places such as the Maghreb, Somalia and Southern Arabia.

Conclusion

- 20 The geographical and geopolitical situation of the peninsula, at the intersection of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean arenas, and in the center of the Muslim world as well as in the middle of the British Empire, contributed to making it a space of circulation and particularly rich exchange. This is especially apparent in the region’s educational history, to which this issue seeks to contribute. Particularly, it shows the role of transnational actors, including non-Arabs and Arabs from outside the region, in the dissemination of modern educational models, essentially inspired by the Egyptian, Iraqi and British experiences, and the dynamics of their integration at the local level. The various ways in which local authorities responded to these educational initiatives, and sometimes put forth initiatives of their own as in the case of Kuwait, confer upon the region a unique character.
- 21 Between the 1930s and the end of the 1950s, the ruling authorities’ management of the educational sector in response to the growing demand for “modern” education contributed to the consolidation of their political power. These countries thus resemble the model of the “semi-peripheral” states identified by the sociologist of law Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1990) in Portugal and Spain in the 1970s.¹⁹ While government initiatives to expand local systems of education existed in various states in the region from the first half of the 20th century, these states (with the partial exception of Saudi Arabia) failed to implement systems of mass education effectively “from the top down” before the 1960s. To remedy this shortcoming, these states therefore afforded space for diverse non-governmental and foreign initiatives to

establish schools, allowing some of them to develop to meet societal demands and expectations. In some cases, the states' regulation of these schools, through the control of their number, location, and the selection of teachers and curricula, provided a basis upon which they built part of their authority. This was apparent in the case of the Yemeni Imamate's approach to Islamic institutions. According to the model proposed by Santos, this type of regulation of the private sector, by increasing the heterogeneity of the state's fields of action, contributes greatly to jeopardizing its very legitimacy, especially when financial resources run out. The scarce resources of the Imamite Yemen made its regime especially vulnerable of all when the republican revolution started in 1962, brutally exposing its Islamic education system to the massive modernization brought about by Egyptian cooperation. Elsewhere in the Peninsula, oil enabled governments to avoid this fate and consolidate national systems of education. However, this issue invites us to re-examine the legacies of this multifarious educational history, particularly in the Gulf, where a degree of cultural and social openness has persisted within educational systems.

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NOTES

1. See VERDEIL, 2017.
2. Inspired by 'Alī pasha Mubārak, the School Law promulgated in 1868 aimed to place all educational institutions (mainly *kuttābs*) under the responsibility of the State. The law paved the way, at the beginning of the 20th century, for the application of the principle of payment of subsidies in exchange for inspections in schools, which were

required to add to their original missions the teaching of arithmetic. See DELANOUE, 1982, p. 488–558, and DE LAVERGNE, 2007.

3. Ulrike Freitag's work, in particular, made it possible to take stock of the networks of scholars and students of the Hadrami community in the Indian Ocean in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, and the impact of their circulation in the development of a current of reform of Islamic educational institutions in Hadramaut. See FREITAG and CLARENCE-SMITH, 1997; FREITAG, 2003.

4. VERDEIL, 2017.

5. It was in 1869 that the first Education Regulations – *Maarif Umumiye Nizamnamesi* – were promulgated, which marked the beginning of an effort to centralize education, intended to foster “a common sense of belonging to a centralized political unit” according to FORTNA, 2002, p. 198. See also SOMEL, 2001.

6. See the Danish mission website dedicated to Aden: <https://danmission.dk/photoarchive/area/aden-yemen/?lang=en>

7. See ISMĀ'ĪL, 2010, p. 229–235.

8. AL-HAJRI, 2011, p. 121–131. On Christian missions in the Peninsula, see VANDER WERFF, 1977, p. 170–182; SCUDDER, 1998; ALBATENI, 2014.

9. The Arabian Peninsula differs little from the rest of the Arab world in this respect, despite some rare works that, again, focus on Egypt. See DE LAVERGNE, 2005, as well as GRANDIN-BLANC and GABORIEAU, 1987.

10. Regarding the Arabian Peninsula, see in particular the work of Michael Farquhar on the Islamic University of Medina, created in 1961, and the conditions under which it participates in the export of Saudi religious education to the Islamic world: FARQUHAR, 2017. See also BONNEFOY, 2011.

11. The movement is general, as pointed out in VERDEIL 2017, p. 19. See the non-exhaustive list in the bibliography.

12. It was followed in 1927 by the *Majlis al-Ma'arif* (Council of Knowledge) and in 1953 by the *Wizārat al-Ma'arif* (Ministry of Knowledge), from which the Administration of Colleges and Religious Institutes separated in 1955 (N. Samin).

13. The Committee can be regarded as “proto-governmental,” as it was initially financed by merchants, yet headed by a member of the ruling family. In the years following the Committee's creation, governmental control over education gradually solidified leading up to the creation of *Dā'irat al-Ma'arif* (the Educational Department) in 1929. AL-TAJIR 1987, p. 135–139.

14. The Council was elected from among the merchants and presided over by a ruling family member, and financed through customs duties. A year later, the Council formed *Dā'irat al-Ma'arif* (the Educational Department). AL-RASHOUD 2016, p. 122–123.

15. AL-RASHOUD, 2016, p. 49–56, and 64–72.

16. See also PÉTRIAT 2016, p. 318–320.

17. This opposition, highlighted by national and developmental historiographies, is now strongly criticized by authors who argue for the role of the school as a place of resistance to political powers in the context of educational expansion and at the local level, where political competition was strong. See MAZAWI 2002, p. 59–74.

- 18.** These are the “Famous Forty” students who were the first to be sent abroad. See ROSSER, 1998, and BURROW, 2005.
- 19.** BONAL and RAMBLA, 1996, p. 13-27.
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