

*Regional Plague: The Social and Political
Conditions in the Middle East and North Africa*

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Spring 2005

Rising prices at the gas pump, Americas' involvement in the Iraq war, terrorist attacks on American soil and interests abroad, and the Israeli-Palestine Peace Process are all headlines for today's newspapers to name just a few. However there is much we must understand about the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) before we begin to draw conclusions. A widely held ideal is that Middle Eastern culture, values and beliefs are very different from American ideals, and this is simply not true. Dr James Zogby a researcher on Arab and Middle Eastern affairs notes in his book *What Arabs Think: Their Values, Beliefs, and Concerns* that "the basket of priority concerns chosen by Arabs and Americans are quite similar"(Zogby 93). US foreign policy in the region is what makes many Arabs take an unfavorable view on the US as a whole. As Zogby found that "Arabs display favorable attitudes toward many manifestations of America in their midst, including American made products, science and technology, movies, and television, etc....what drives down Arab attitudes towards 'America' is quite simply, the US policy in the region"(Zogby 64).

Education, health and environment, access to technology, economic overview, political parties, and how Arabs view the world will be the focus in this paper. In these sections you will see great disparities in the MENA region. This is a main concern as the people of the Arab world must live and be the victims of these disparities daily. However, I aim not to show what America needs to do to change Arab opinion in the MENA region, but instead I will show an overview of the MENA region and how it has an affect on those who live their.

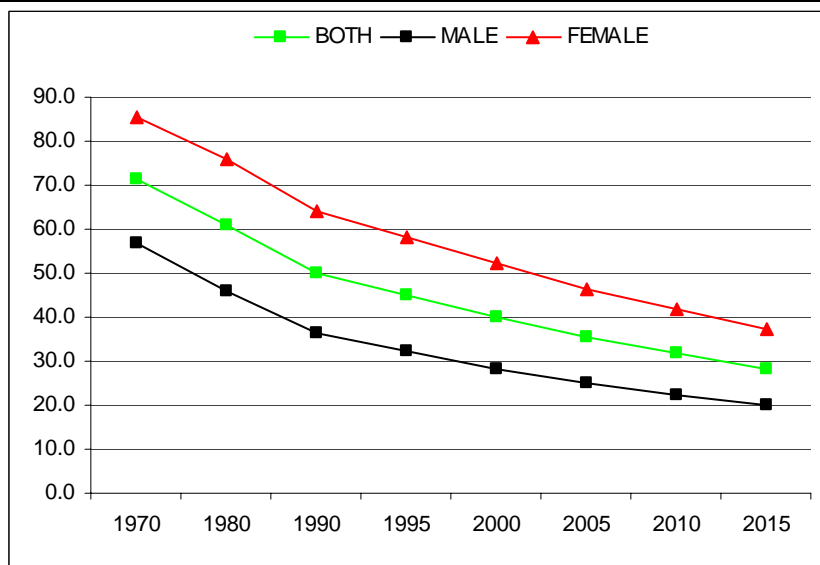
How well is the MENA region doing compared to other areas of the world that are developing, and is there any disparity amongst the MENA nations?

EDUCATION

Education is a major issue that faces all countries of the world on daily basis. There are benefits to having a society that has basic education, and few, if any, benefits to having a society that is not. Basic education would include reading and writing abilities. Let it be noted that the MENA countries have made great improvements in their educational attainment rates since the mid twentieth century. Still, there is still much improvement needed in the MENA region as far as education is concerned. "While education has made headway among the younger generations, illiteracy has proved difficult to eradicate. Therefore, the overall educational achievement among adults in Arab countries remains low on average" (Arab Human Development Report 2002 p51). Figure 1 shows Adult Illiteracy Rates from 1970-2015(projected) in the MENA region. Males had a 56.9% Illiteracy rate while females had an astounding 85.5% illiteracy rate in 1970. This data is evidence for the popular understanding that women and children are often those whom suffer most through disparities in developing regions such as the MENA. Even though the illiteracy rates have fallen significantly in the past 30 years, and look to fall another 10% by 2015, the illiteracy rates are still higher in the MENA region than the world average. Figure 1 will show that at present date the illiteracy rate for males and females in the MENA region is 25.1% and 46.5% respectively. In other

words one out of four males cannot read, while almost half of all the MENA region females cannot read. One problem of this high

Figure 1. MENA Adult Illiteracy Rates 1970-2015(projected)



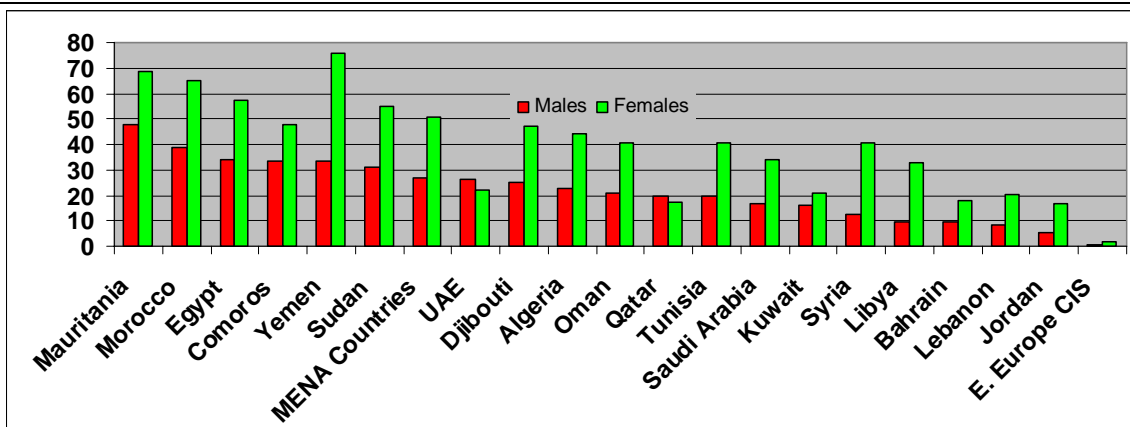
Source: UNSECO

illiteracy rate is that the people are not able to read newspapers or gain education that could help bring about prosperity into the region. The reliance on those who can read can be a poison to their mind as they may be influenced by organizations such as Al Qaeda for their daily news reports. Television, it will be shown, is

not widely available throughout the MENA region.

Egypt, a natural leader of the Arab world, has one of the higher illiteracy rates. While schooling is free and available to all in Egypt through its Socialist government, the program is not working as well as officials would like to see. Figure 2 shows the position of the individual MENA counties illiteracy rates amongst both males and females. Lebanon and Jordan are clearly the leaders of the MENA region with the lowest illiteracy rates amongst them. However, even compared to Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, the MENA illiteracy rates are head and shoulders above the two whom are clearly not leading developed nations. Obviously Soviet Communism had a much better outcome than did Arab “Baa'thist Socialism” that Syria and Iraq (under Saddam) subscribed to.

Figure 2. Adult Illiteracy Rates (%) for Select MENA Countries



Source: Arab Human Development Report 2002

Women should not be overlooked here either as they often are around the world. Arab culture does not place as much importance on women's education. Rather a traditional form of education that would not involve literacy is employed when teaching these women what the MENA culture feels they should know. The "illiteracy rates among males in Arab countries is not expected to disappear before the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, and for women, not until 2040"(Arab Human Development Report 2002 p52). This way of thinking must be combated and actually has in Lebanon where the "educational system...is considered one of the most advanced in the Arab region in so far as quality and gender equality are concerned. The gender gap in enrollment has been bridged, that is, female enrolment has become a bit higher than that of males at the preparatory and secondary stages of education"(Arab Human Development Report 2002 p55). However, with a 24% gap between male and female illiteracy rates, the problem is going to take awhile to correct.

High illiteracy rates in the MENA countries can be easily linked to the mean years of schooling received in the MENA region. This shows a serious problem in the MENA education system overall when compared to OECD countries or again in the Eastern Europe/CIS countries.

Figure 3. Mean Years of Schooling

	1970	1992	2000
Algeria	1.6	2.8	5.4
Bahrain	2.8	4.3	6.1
Comoros	-	-	1
Djibouti	-	0.4	-
Egypt	-	3	5.5
Iraq	-	-	5
Jordan	3.3	5	6.9
Kuwait	3.1	5.5	6.2
Lebanon	-	4.4	-
Libya	-	3.5	-
Mauritania	-	0.4	-
Morocco	-	3	-
Oman	-	0.9	-
Qatar	-	5.8	-
Saudi Arabia	-	3.9	-
Somalia	-	0.3	-
Sudan	0.6	0.8	2.1
Syria	2.2	4.2	5.8
Tunisia	1.5	2.1	5
UAE	-	5.6	-
Yemen	-	0.9	-
MENA Region	-	3.4	-
OECD Countries	7.3	11.1	9.6
Eastern Europe/CIS	-	8.8	-

Source: Arab Human Development Report 2002

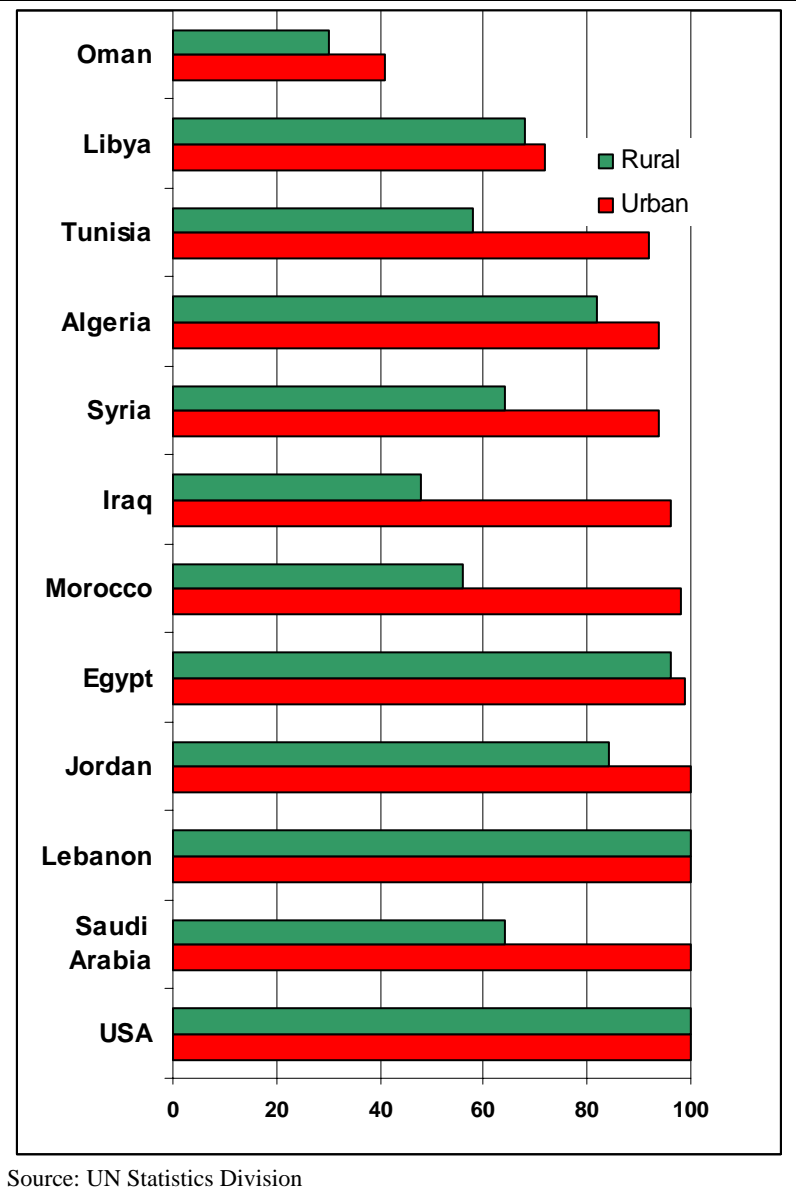
Here in Figure 3 one can see that the average amount of schooling is only 3.4 years for MENA countries. The best 2000 rates are Jordan (6.9), Kuwait (6.2), and Bahrain (6.1). The MENA regions lowest rates lie in Somalia where averages of only three months are attended of schooling. Or one can look at Figure 3 and compare the OECD countries to the MENA region average and find a difference of 7.7 years amongst the two. Even when the 2000 OECD data (which shows a decline) is compared to the 1992 MENA data, the difference is still almost three times that of the MENA region. Some attributes to the low years of education are from the fact that quality education that must be obtained in the private schools is too costly for most. Therefore financially privileged groups are the ones who attend schooling, and education, in turn loses out on its role a means of "achieving social advancement"

(Arab Human Development Report 2002 p54). Still the overall picture, though bleak, has shown improvement in the education sector of the Arab world.

HEALTH AND ENVIROMENT

Overall the outlook here is much better than would appear to be. Of course there is a great disparity amongst the different MENA states as was noted earlier. MENA countries do lead the world, or at least have better resource accessibility than other developing areas, for example they do lead in low HIV rates.

Figure 4. Access to Improved Drinking Water



The access they have to Improved Drinking Water can be seen in Figure 4. Again Lebanon is a leader in the MENA region, along with Egypt and Jordan respectively. In Figure 4 both Urban and Rural populations are represented here, and as one can see both have fairly good Improved Drinking Water resources; all countries represented, with exception to Oman, have a 70% or higher improved water access rate for their urban population. The rural population is not too bad off either when one takes into consideration that much of the land is desert terrain, or mountainous. Considering that freshwater is hard to find in this terrain, it is obvious that the governments of the

MENA region have put much effort into securing these resources for their people. As a staple of life, fresh, clean drinking water has obvious priorities amongst MENA nations.

Another important Health and Environment factor strongly tied to Improved Drinking Water is that of Improved Sanitation. Around the world people contribute immensely to the contamination of their own water resources. Again, MENA countries have shown that Improved Sanitation is a main concern for the region. Only one of the countries represented, Morocco with 86%, has less than 90% Access to Improved Sanitation in the urban areas.

The next lowest as seen in Figure 5 is Iraq with a 93% Urban Sanitation rating. Figure 5 does show some low rates in the rural areas of the MENA countries however; Iraq 31%, Morocco 44%, Oman 61% and Tunisia 62%. Compared to the USA which pulls a 100% in both areas, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, and Lebanon all either meet the US standard or deviate by only 7% in both areas combined.

Figure 6. Life Expectancy at Birth

	Male	Female
Israel	77.1	81
Kuwait	74.9	79
UAE	73.3	77.4
Bahrain	72.5	75.9
Libya	70.8	75.4
Qatar	70.5	75.4
Lebanon	71.9	75.1
Tunisia	70.8	74.9
Oman	71	74.4
Saudi Arabia	71.1	73.7
Syria	70.6	73.1
Jordan	69.7	72.5
Algeria	68.1	71.3
Egypt	66.7	71
Morocco	66.8	70.5
Iraq	59.2	62.3
Yemen	58.9	61.1
Sudan	54.1	57.1
Mauritania	50.9	54.1
Somalia	46.4	49.5
Djibouti	44.7	46.8
USA	74.3	79.9

Source: UN Statistics Division

Figure 5.

Access to Improved Sanitation (%)		
	Urban	Rural
Iraq	93	31
Morocco	86	44
Oman	98	61
Tunisia	96	62
Syria	98	81
Algeria	99	85
Lebanon	100	87
Egypt	100	96
Libya	97	96
Jordan	100	98
Saudi Arabia	100	100
USA	100	100

Source: UN Statistics Division

The United Nations Statistics Division shows evidence of disparity amongst the MENA region in the form of life expectancy. Figure 6 is a compiled table of the average year's males and females can expect to live in the MENA countries. The US has been included to compare to. It can be seen that Israel "outlives" American citizens, while Kuwaiti practically tie the US life expectancy. Other states are not so fortunate as Kuwait or Israel and again provide evidence to the great disparities in the MENA countries. Djibouti, Somalia, and Mauritania all suffer death rates below the age of 51 for men, 55 for women.

A last look into the Health and Environment section of the MENA countries is that of HIV prevalence rates. In Figure 7 it is evident that the MENA region is a world leader in keeping HIV rates low. Only two countries represented, Bahrain and Libya, go over 0.1%. All other countries represented have either a 0.1% or lower HIV prevalence rate, while the United States faces 0.6% HIV prevalence rate. This is extremely astonishing

considering that the countries surrounding the MENA region have some of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world. It can be argued that religious beliefs would keep the disease from spreading in the MENA region.

Figure 7. HIV Prevalence Rate (%)

	2001	2003
Algeria	0.1*	0.1*
Bahrain	0.1	0.2
Egypt	0.1*	0.1*
Iraq	-	0.1*
Israel	-	0.1
Jordan	0.1*	0.1*
Lebanon	0.1	0.1
Libya	-	0.3
Morocco	-	0.1
Oman	0.1	0.1
Syria	-	0.1*
Tunisia	0.1*	0.1*
USA	0.6	0.6
Yemen	-	0.1

* denotes less than 0.1% prevalence rate
Source: UN Statistics Division

TECHNOLOGY

Looking on to the technology that MENA countries have, again disparities can be seen. Again countries on bordering the Arabian Gulf like Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates enjoy the most widespread use of modern communications.

In Figures 8 and 9 the Telephone Lines, and Number of personal computers per thousand people are shown. Though this is not even close to being “world leader” rates, the MENA region around the Arabian Gulf area enjoys more than their neighbors. Qatar’s government for example has focused on transforming the country into an IT leader

of the Middle East. The Qatari government has also gone online, <https://www.e.gov.qa/eGovPortal> to help its’ citizens better access the governmental services available.

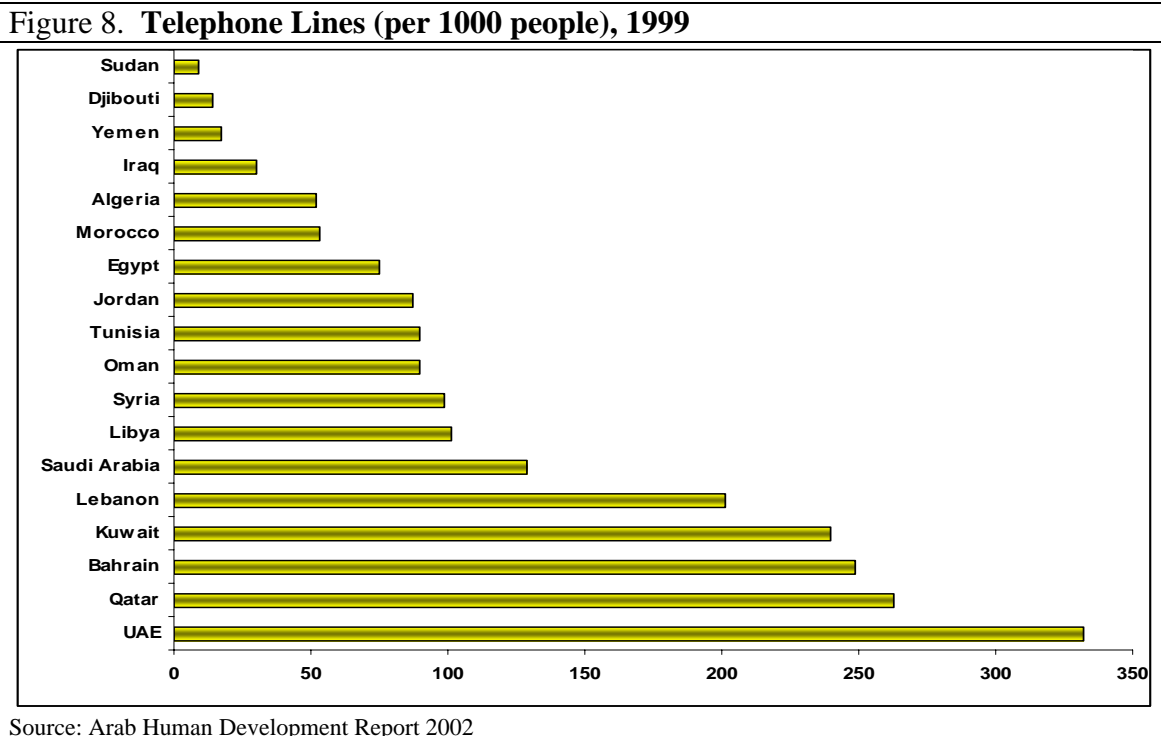
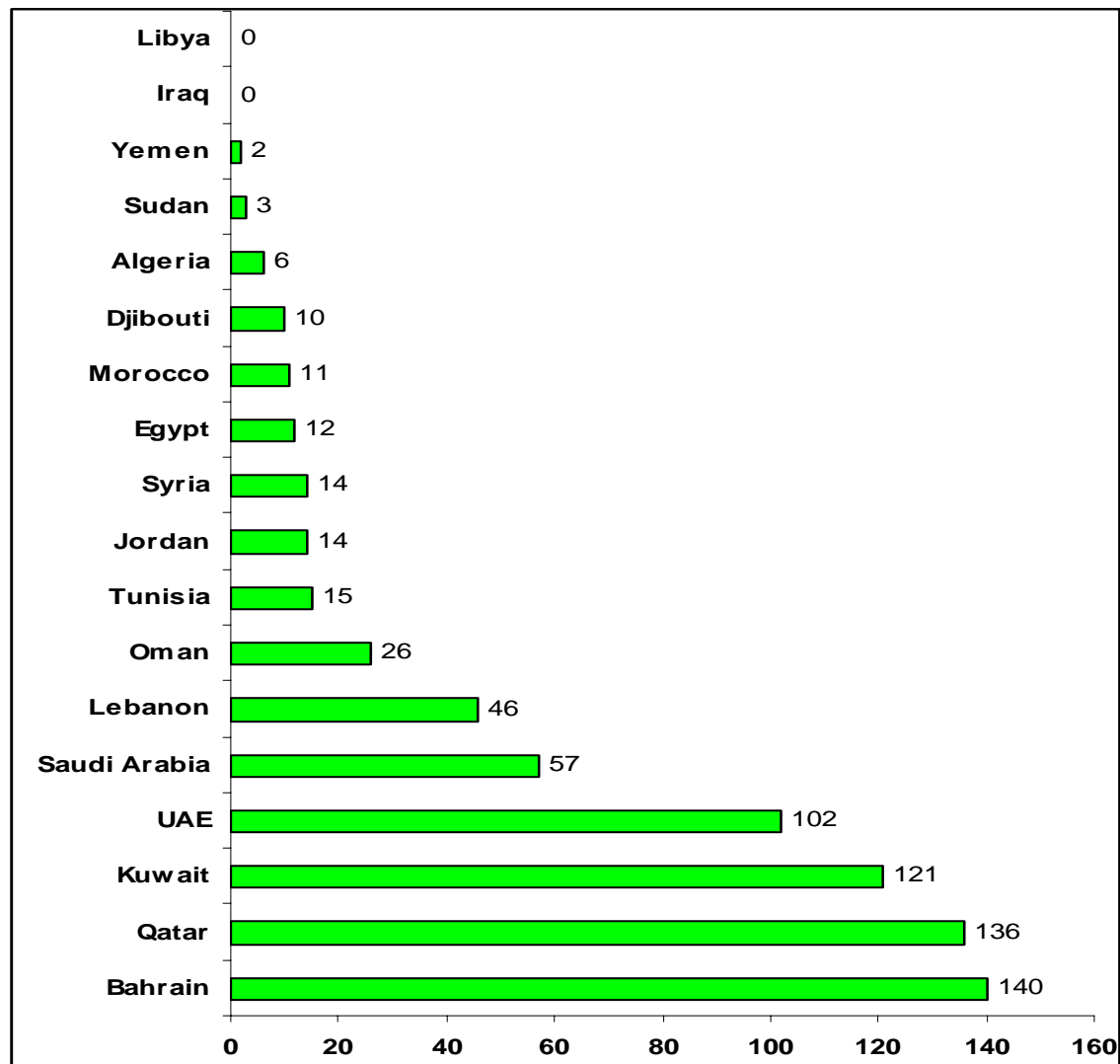


Figure 9. Number of Personal Computers (per 1000 people), 1999



Source: Arab Human Development Report 2002

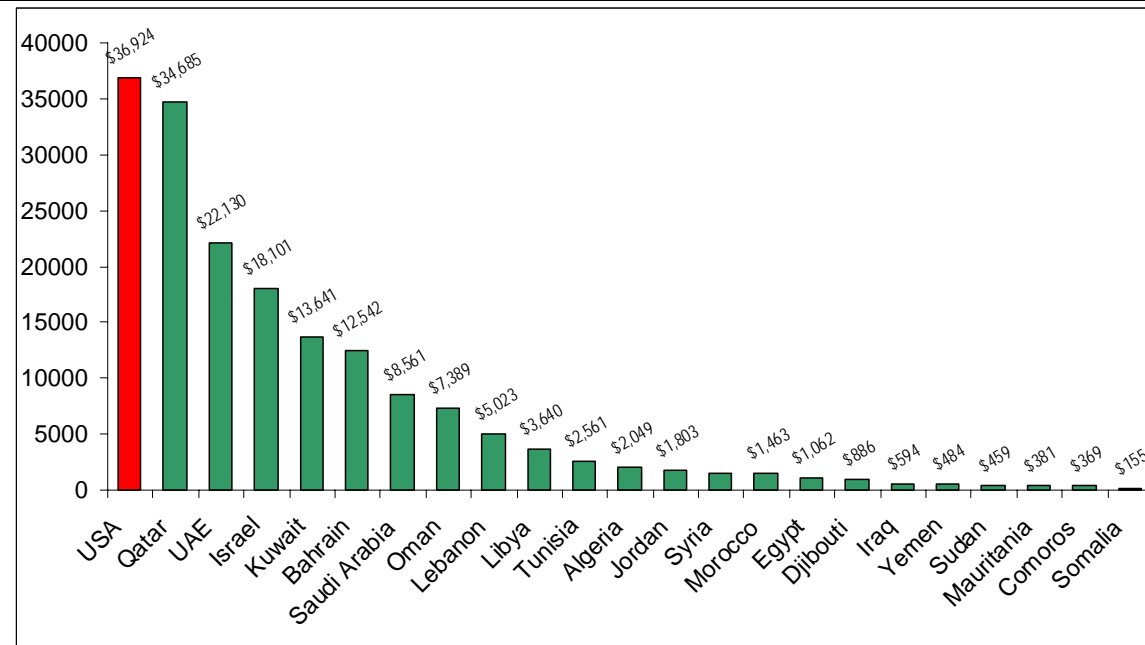
Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, and Iraq all have less than 50 phone lines per one thousand people. As far as personal computers are concerned, Libya and Iraq are reported to have zero personal computers per 1000. Now that shall surely change due to the fact Iraq has been liberated from Saddam, and is being redeveloped by the US, and economic sanctions have been lifted from Libya.

ECONOMIC

The economic output of the MENA region is one where the most contrast can be seen. As some countries receive much foreign aid, and others actually give it. Oil exports help countries like Kuwait, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates enjoy the higher levels of MENA income. While yet vast oil exports from Saudi Arabia allow only for it's' citizens to gain an average of \$8,561 per year. It is clearly seen that the oil in the MENA region is a notable economic asset for the state which produces it. Iraq however,

formerly under economic sanctions from the UN even with all its' oil, could not do better than \$594 for Iraqi citizens as seen in Figure 10. Qatar again is only around \$3000 shy of the average Americans salary per year. While Israel, the number one recipient of US foreign aid donations, makes only \$18,101 per year. Israel does not enjoy the oil reserves that those on the Arabian Gulf enjoy; as well Israel has to face a major security problem in the region as it has warred with Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon in the past and continues to occupy Palestine. Yet even Libya, with years of economic sanctions enjoys more GDP than 13 other MENA countries.

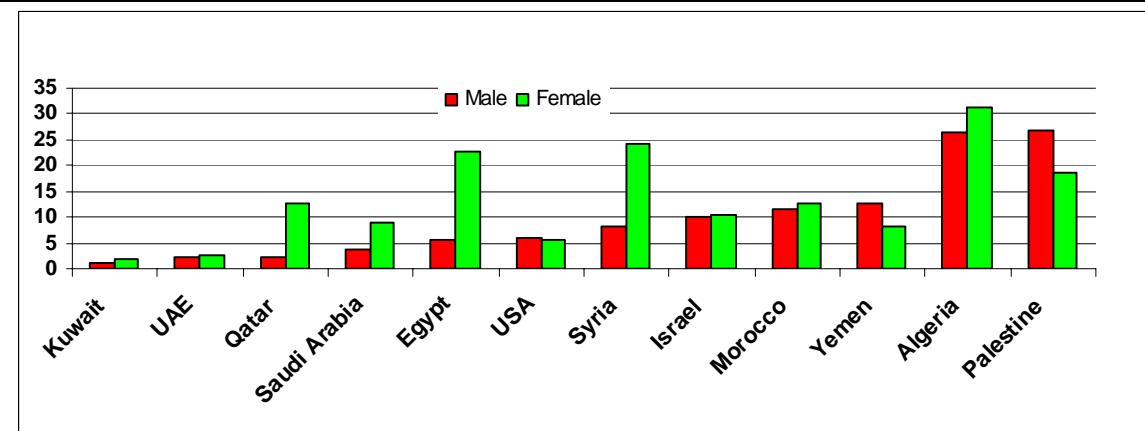
Figure 10. **GDP in USD by MENA Countries**



Source: UN Statistics Division

Unemployment rates in the MENA region can again range greatly. In Figure 11 it is shown how Palestinian, and Algerian males have unemployment rates of 25% or more.

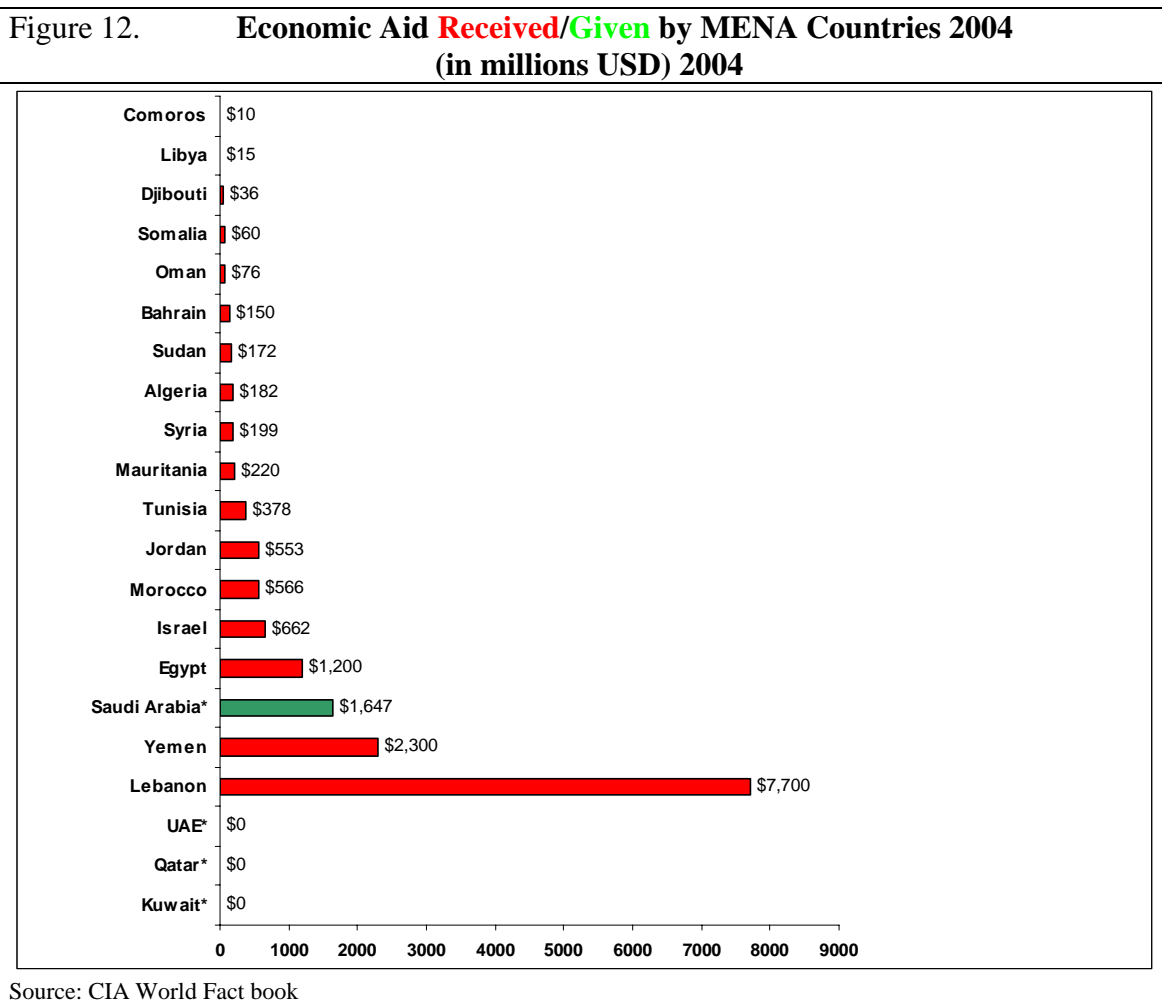
Figure 11. **Unemployment Rates in Select MENA Countries (%)**



Source: UN Statistics Division

While Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait all have lower male unemployment rates than does the United States. It must be noted also that the gap between male and female unemployment rates is always in favor of males except for the case of Palestinians, and Yemenis in the MENA region.

Since the MENA economy is not so well off many countries are recipients of foreign aid. In Figure 12 the lowest amount of economic aid received is \$10 million going to the island of Comoros off the coast of Africa. Lebanon somehow pulls \$7.7 billion dollars from foreign aid donations according to the CIA World Fact book (CIA). Saudi Arabia is in the green because they actually donate or have pledged \$1.647 billion dollars to foreign aid recipients. United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait do not receive foreign aid as well, though how much they donate is not known either. Both Egypt and Yemen benefit to the tune of \$1.2 billion and \$2.3 billion in foreign aid respectively.



Israel on the other hand is a MENA region leader collecting over \$660 million dollars in foreign aid; all coming from the United States. As noted earlier in the paper this is a sore spot for Arabs when shaping their opinion on the USA. It is well known that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a rally cause for many Arabs living in the

MENA region. “After more than three generations of conflict, the betrayal and the denial of Palestinian rights, this issue of Palestine appears to have become a defining one of general Arab concern...[However] the situation of the Palestinians appears to have become a personal matter” rather than a issue of foreign policy or the MENA region as a whole(Zogby 34).

OTHER MENA ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The current hot topic of US foreign policy is that of spreading democracy throughout the world. America invaded Iraq on both the stance of eradicating Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction program, and clear regime change within Iraq. With all luck and hard work from dedicated individuals, one can hope that the instillation of democracy in Iraq bears more fruit than the weapons of mass destruction search has to date. Therefore Iraq will grow to be a model of democracy to the neighboring MENA region, something that is a real concern as Figure 13 illustrates.

Figure 13. **Major & Banned Political Parties**

	Number of Authorized Political Parties	Number of Political Parties in the Government	Number of Banned Parties
Algeria	37	6	4
Egypt	16	1	10
Iraq	1	1	19
Jordan	36	non-partisan	-
Lebanon	18	-	-
Libya	-	-	10 exiled groups
Mauritania	-	-	-
Morocco	22	7	1
Palestine	6	1	-
Sudan	15	1	9 clandestine groups
Syria	6	1	6
Tunisia	7	1	9
Yemen	5	2	-

Source: Arab Human Development Report 2002

Throughout the MENA region there are many reliable political parties, however many have been banned from participating in the political process of their homeland. As Figure 13 shows Libya has 10 groups exiled from the country, Iraq has 19 banned from participation, and Sudan has 9 political parties that run clandestine operations in order to get their message and agenda spread.

Jordan, a kingdom, at least gives a voice to those wishing to be heard by allowing over 36 political parties to participate in the democratic process. However as can be seen through Figure 13, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia do not appear on the list because they are ruled by monarchs; Saudi Arabia being the last absolute monarchy on earth. “This freedom deficit undermines human development and is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development. While de jure acceptance of democracy and human rights is enshrined in constitutions, legal codes, and government

pronouncements, de facto implementation is often neglected and, in some cases, deliberately disregarded”(Arab Human Development Report 2002 p 2).

The last thing examined is the concerns of Arabs, the importance of values they feel necessary to teaching their children and the ranking of political concerns.

Figure 14. Order of Concerns Amongst MENA countries

Concern	Rank	Cumulative Total	Average Rank
Quality of work	1	16	2
Family	2	18	2.5
Religion	3	23	3
Job Security	4	23	3
Marriage	5	42	3.5
Friends	6	46	6
Political Issues in Country	7	53	7
Political Issues facing Arabs	8	61	8
Leisure time	9	73	9

Source: Zogby International

Looking at Figure 14 it is shown here that Arabs view “Quality of Work” more of a concern than most other issues, narrowly beating out “family” in the list of overall concerns.

Religion and Job Security tied evenly at a average rank of 3 though religion was ranked number one in four countries whereas job quality was not ranked number one concern at all. This is why religion holds a slightly higher rank though all numbers are equal. It can also be seen when looking at the cumulative totals in Figure 14, of the nine issues, the first four, Quality of Work, Family, Religion, and Job Security are much higher concern than the last five; almost double the ranking points difference.

Figure 15. Importance of Values to be Taught to Children in MENA Region Countries

Value	Rank	Cumulative Total	Average Rank
Self Respect	1	25	3
Good Health and Hygiene	2	26	3.5
Responsibility	3	27	3.5
Respect for Elders	4	31	4
Achieve a Better Life	5	33	4
Self-Reliance	6	45	5.5
Religious Faith	7	50	6
Serious Work Habits	8	51	6.5
Obedience	9	63	7
Creativity/Imagination	10	80	10
Tolerance of Others	11	82	10
Respect for Authority	12	88	11

Source: Zogby International

The importance of values that should be taught to children amongst Arabs shows that “Self-Respect” is a number one concern overall beating out “Good Health and Hygiene” and “Responsibility” by one and two cumulative points respectively. Figure 15 also shows that “Respect for Authority” is ranked at the bottom of

concerns amongst Arabs. However, “Respect for Elders” and “Obedience” are ranked 4th and 9th respectively.

Lastly, looking at the way Arabs in MENA countries rank political issues will give us an idea of the issues of concern that we must understand and take into consideration when pondering whether or not MENA countries are better off than their comparators. It can be seen in Figure 16 that Civil and Personal rights are the main concern, along with health care. Interestingly enough we again see the issue of Palestine and Palestinian rights reappear when discussing political issues amongst the MENA region respondents.

Figure 16. Ranking of Political Issues Concerning MENA Region Respondents			
Political Issue	Rank	Cumulative Total	Average Rank
Civil/Personal Rights	1	15	2
Health Care	2	20	2.5
Palestine	3	30	4
Personal Economic Situation	4	32	4
Rights of Palestinians	5	33	4
Moral Standards	6	35	4.5
Economy of Country	7	52	5.5
Country Meeting Challenges	8	63	6
General Arab Situation	9	69	7
Relationship w/Non-Arab Countries	10	80	10

Source: Zogby International

Not surprisingly Arab political concerns tend to focus on matters close to home rather than issues of international or regional concern. “Relationship w/Non-Arab Countries” was ranked at the bottom of the list, showing that matters least in the grand scheme of issues. Of course the next lowest priority is that of the “General Arab Situation” lending credence to the fact that Arabs are more concerned with their own situation rather than that of others; this is not much different from what is observed in many developed and developing countries worldwide.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Arabs Education is much lower than the developed countries and the women in the MENA region suffer most from this situation, as they usually have much less opportunity than males for schooling. Illiteracy rates are high in the MENA region as is evident by a current rate of 35% amongst adults. Again women’s rates are higher than males overall, and some countries it is almost double the illiteracy rate. With the average MENA country rate of 3.4 years of schooling it is no wonder why these rates are so high. Also it was seen how the difference between the individual countries in the region makes great divides, though education is not the only area we saw that.

The figures on Health and Environment showed us that much of the population has access to improved water and sanitation resources if in the urban areas of the countries. Rural folks tend to be less off due to the fact of the desert terrain hindering the

ability to provide these services. Still much improvement is needed to make the overall quality of life better in these areas.

One place that is not divided amongst the MENA region is its' HIV prevalence rates, where most countries show less than 0.1% HIV prevalence rates. Significantly lower than the United States 0.6% HIV prevalence rate. Life Expectancy is however another regional dividing factor with some expected to live less than 60 years old; a Djiboutian for example can expect less than 45 years of life on average. Djibouti's' neighbors across the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia are however enjoying 71 years of life on average. This is one area as well where women tend to be better off than males, as the women in every country reported outlive the men.

Technology and the digital divide is another area that has regional difference which can be linked to the economy of the individual MENA countries. As countries like Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia enjoy higher GDP through the oil exports they produced, they also enjoy more access to phone lines and internet/personal computer usage. The economic aid received in the region can also be linked to how the country is doing overall. The countries with higher GDP don't get as much economic aid, with the exception of Israel.

And lastly we have seen the Arabs in the MENA region have and want the same things we in the US value. However they do not have the same access to political change through their governments; as many political freedoms we enjoy are not afforded to the MENA Regions residents. The Arabs concerns are also more closely focused on things "at home" rather than regionally or internationally outside the MENA region.

So it can be see that the MENA region is doing better than one would expect, but many strides must be taken in order to better the quality of life in the region. Major gaps exist in the individual countries making up the MENA region and put some at a disadvantaged when compared to their neighbors bordering them. Overall the people of the MENA region have a better quality of life than their peers in other developing regions such as South East Asia, or Sub-Sahara Africa. We still must understand though that there are issues the MENA region needs to solve for their livelihood to improve. Other contrast such as Americas support of economic aid to Israel while other countries suffer much more disadvantage make the MENA region suspicious to the United States and our policies. When the MENA region is able to improve its lot as a whole region, rather than individual countries, we will see an end to the headlines we fear so much; terrorism, war, economic oil crisis.

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