

## **THE UNCOMPLETED REFORMS: THE POLITICAL MECHANISMS OF REFORMING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN THE ARAB GULF STATES**

**Ibrahim Alhouti**  
Kuwait University

### **Abstract**

During the past two decades, the Arab Gulf states (AGS) have invested heavily in reforming both the K-12 and higher education systems in the belief that this might improve the human capital and enable the region to shift toward a knowledge economy instead of relying on hydrocarbon as the primary source of state income. Yet, after this long period, these systems are still underperforming, and the region continues to struggle with providing quality educational practices that enable its citizens to contribute to the “knowledge economy” specifically or to the future of their states more generally. Many international consultants have been involved in these reforms to develop the so-called ‘neoliberal’ education reform agenda; many projects have been launched and implemented. While sporadic changes have been observed, the situation remains largely unchanged. The question is why these states have not achieved their goal: a highly-skilled nation capable of competing globally. Critical scholars have placed significant emphasis on the political mechanisms and the social circumstances in the process of education reform and its implementation (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Heck, 2004; Nitta, 2012; Portnoi, 2016; Taylor et al., 1997; Williams & Cummings, 2005). In a similar vein, this article approaches the question of education reform in the AGS by looking at it critically from a contextual and political perspective, which is considered a new approach to studying these reforms. In doing so, the paper highlights that this drive for change avoided certain political and socio-economic matters, which may account for the low achievement and

consistent underperformance of these reform initiatives in the education and development arenas. This article applies a qualitative comparative approach to examine education reform in the region by analysing key policy documents and relevant literature that studied the reform. My argument is twofold: First, the extensive involvement of the ruling establishment and the top-down policy process remain unchanged. Secondly, over the past 60 years, the region has relied heavily on foreign consultants, which indicates a lack of confidence in the local expertise to handle the reforms. Also, the 'street-level bureaucrats' such as school leaders and teachers remain neglected in the policy process. Finally, the political and bureaucratic contexts remain undiscussed in reforming the education system. Matters such as the instability of the leadership and the bureaucratic structures impact the low calibre of employees in the Ministry of Education but are not considered in the reform process; they seem to be a redline for the ruling establishment. Contextual changes are a crucial factor in achieving successful and sustained educational reforms, but the AGS is unwilling to risk making these changes. For policymakers and education reformers in the region, this article offers an invitation to seriously consider the contextual and political dimensions and boundaries when imagining, articulating, and implementing future education reform initiatives.

**Keywords:** Reforms, education systems, Arab Gulf States, knowledge economy

## **Introduction**

Education reforms have been the main topic in most governments' agendas, especially after the new global movement toward UN Sustainable Development Goals, of which quality of education is the fourth goal that governments must accomplish by 2030. Yet, the aim has now shifted from simply making education accessible for all to also ensuring the quality of this education. This shift has changed both the content of required reforms and the political challenges they pose (Bruns, Macdonald, & Schneider, 2019) because expanding access to schools is a totally different story from ensuring the quality of the learning process at these schools. This is why education reform is not an easy task (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves, 2005; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Harris & Jones, 2018; Sahlberg, 2006).

Politicians worldwide have become very interested in reforming the education system, looking at it as a vehicle for achieving social, political, and economic development. Moreover, with the rise of global economic competition, many large-scale education reforms have been justified to achieve the highest level of competitiveness (Sahlberg, 2006). As a result, a new Global Educational Reform Movement emerged, with states competing against each other to reform their education systems while at the same time copying one another's reforms (Almoaibed, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2018; Mohamed & Morris, 2019; Sahlberg, 2016). This makes education reforms worldwide look similar to some extent (Sahlberg, 2012).

Sahlberg (2012) argued that this movement must stop because it puts a great deal of pressure on children and schooling to achieve goals that may not even be achievable; most of these education reform movements are unlikely to bring about the expected improvements (Sahlberg, 2006). It is difficult for the reforms to deliver any change because they are poorly conceptualised and happening faster than educators and others can cope with; finally, key staff such as teachers and school leaders are not committed to the reforms (Hargreaves, 2005). As a result, reforms are not well-implemented.

Some politicians see no harm in reforming the education system with less effective implementation. Zhao (2018) argued that some educational practices are similar to medicines in that while they might treat the patient, they also have side effects that need to be acknowledged. To minimise these side effects, the patient must follow the instructions about when and how to take this treatment. From Zhao's point of view, education reform is no different; it must be designed and implemented carefully to avoid harmful side effects. Just as some patients might become addicted to drugs and end up overdosing, some politicians might become addicted to reforms and end with an overdose that harms the entire education system.

As in other developing countries, education reforms in the Arab Gulf States (AGS) have been presented as the main vehicle to achieve the development needed. The AGS – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar – make

up one of the wealthiest regions in the world due to the proportion of global oil reserves and natural gas that they hold (Alshehabi, 2018).

Over the past three decades, the AGS has conducted massive, comprehensive reforms (economic, political, and educational) to diversify their economies by shifting the national income from one relying primarily on oil revenues to one depending on a knowledge economy. Each of the six countries has launched a long-term national vision prepared primarily by Western consultants (Ulrichsen, 2016a), and several of these studies assume that a knowledge-based economy can be achieved only through education (El-Kogali, Quota, & Sekkarie, 2017; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010; Wiseman, Alromi, & Alshumrani, 2014). As a result, improving the quality and efficacy of the national education systems has become central to these national visions (Nolan, 2012). For the first time, the AGS began to link economic and labour market issues solely to the education (Kirk, 2013). It is important to note that the concept of a knowledge-based economy was not generated by local scholars or by any national assessment of the economic situation to determine what works within the region; instead, it was proposed by international organisations and Western consultants. The feasibility of establishing knowledge-based economies in the AGS is still in question.

Despite the heavy investment in reforming their K-12 education systems, these systems are still “underperforming” according to global education indications, and the region continues to struggle

with providing quality educational practices that enable its citizens to contribute to the “knowledge economy” specifically. Many international consultants have been involved in developing the so-called ‘neoliberal’ education reform agenda; many projects have been launched and implemented. However, while sporadic changes have been observed, the situation remains largely unchanged.

Throughout the past two decades, education systems in the AGS have not rested; they have changed often, and I fear that we will become what Merrow (2017) described as ‘addicted to reform’. Yet we still face the same challenges; our education outcomes are low, students are not prepared well for global competitive markets, and most importantly, the region relies very heavily on oil revenues and has not come close to a knowledge-based economy. Borrowing from Kassab’s (2010) concerns about political oppression causing a culture crisis; I ask: Has political domination been the cause of our education crisis? Why have we not established a strong education system, and why can we modernise our education system without becoming westernised and losing our souls?

This paper seeks to understand the unrest in our education system and the failure to reform it. The paper aims to highlight the political matters avoided in this drive for change, which I argue might help explain these reform initiatives’ low achievement and consistent underperformance in the education and development arenas.

## **The context of reforming the education system in the Arab Gulf States**

First, it is necessary to contextualise the educational reforms in the AGS to understand why the region is putting enormous efforts into reforming the education system, what its purposes are in the first place, and who benefits from these reforms.

Formal education in the region was established only recently; However, several informal practices were launched earlier, and the state took full responsibility for funding and leading the education system only after beginning to export oil. In Kuwait, for example, this was in the late 1930s, and in Qatar the early 1950s, when the newly established modern states started using oil revenues to expand the education system by building as many schools as possible and bringing teachers from other Arab states (Cammett, Diwan, Richards, & Waterbury, 2015; Ridge, 2014). The AGS quickly managed to make education accessible to most of the population. At that time, since most citizens were illiterate and incapable of helping in the development phase, the main aim was to educate these citizens so they could help build the new modern states and institutions (Cammett et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, given the sizable spending on education since the region's formal education systems were established, its quality was low (Akkary & Rizk, 2014; World Bank, 2008). One explanation was that the rulers at that time focused more on quantity than the quality of education. They focused on the number rather than the

quality of teachers; they were concerned with building more schools but not with what exactly the schools needed to teach (Al-Sulayti, 1999; Barber, Mourshed, & Whelan, 2007).

What makes the situation more urgent now is that the region's challenges have changed significantly over the last two decades, from the 1940s and 1950s when the education system was first established. Nowadays, the six AGS face massive challenges, mainly in terms of over-reliance on hydrocarbon revenue, the low calibre of employees, and overstaffing in the public sector.

Since the discovery of oil in the AGS, economic and political structures have changed. Hydrocarbon revenue became the sole income of the states, and they relied heavily on it to fund budgets and projects. They built schools and universities and provided free education, free housing, free health care, and generous social subsidies without taxing their citizens in return (Alshehabi, 2017b; Davidson, 2011), in a model rarely observed these days outside the AGS.

All these free services look pleasing, but they need to be more sustainable. The over-reliance on hydrocarbon has adverse effects on the political and economic situations, as well as on the quality of institutions, and such an economy is not considered sustainable (Alshehabi, 2017a; Hertog, 2010; Luciani, 1990; Ulrichsen, 2016b). The governments are no longer capable of funding all these free services for the next generations due to 1) the high population growth and 2) the fluctuations in the hydrocarbon market, which affect the amount of income the government receives. The AGS has



little control over hydrocarbon prices, as they depend on demand; also, the global movement towards clean energy marks a significant threat to the region, which is the largest and cheapest supplier of hydrocarbons in the market. Therefore, diversifying the regional economy is even more urgent today than two decades ago (Ayubi, 2009).

Furthermore, one of the opposing sides of the hydrocarbon revenue is that the state used this revenue to create public sector jobs, with generous salaries and benefits, for its citizens. This was to encourage them to take part in building and developing the state, as well as to distribute part of the wealth. In time, job creation became a purpose in itself, regardless of whether these jobs were needed, and as discussed previously, this created an overstaffed sector. The problem is that with the increasing number of young university graduates, the state can no longer offer them all jobs; at the same time, the private sector cannot compete with the benefits of the public sector to attract those young people, who also are not trained well enough to participate in the private sector. The education system is blamed for this lack of preparation, as its aim and structure have remained the same since it was first established. An education structure from the 1940s can hardly be expected to be capable of preparing the youth for twenty-first-century needs.

Consequently, reforming the education system was presented as a solution for the ongoing challenges facing the Gulf region, and diversification of the economy toward a knowledge-based economy

was the central theme of this reform. The region needs to find a more stable and sustainable alternative to reduce its reliance on hydrocarbon revenue. Also, the education system can take the lead in preparing the younger generation to be more capable of joining the private sector and the global market.

Although this was the main narrative discussed in most of the literature that studied education reform in the Gulf region, we should not forget that when the rulers met in Doha in 2002 to discuss education and its reforms (Secretariat General, 2003), it was soon after the 9/11 incident. The US and the rest of the world have criticised the AGS, blaming their education systems for educating the youth to be extremist (Aldaghishy, 2019). Education reform was required and demanded, and RAND's report clearly stated that the US must push hard for this and must provide full support, including curricula, instructors, and institutions (Rabasa et al., 2004). It is difficult to confirm whether this was the main aim of reforming the education system in the region, and this article does not attempt to discuss this narrative or whether the education system bears any blame for 9/11. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight this here, for it might help us understand the reform differently. Undoubtedly, the 9/11 incident may have accelerated the reforms and created the social and political environment in which to conduct them.

## **Educational reform as a political and economic movement**

As discussed earlier, education reform has been a main topic in education literature in the past three decades. Scholars are working hard to study it from different perspectives, trying to understand the best approach to the successful reform of the education system; using comparative outlooks, they highlight the differences in such reforms and the reasons why something works in some places and not in others (Bruns et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 2005; Harris & Jones, 2018).

Education reforms are a priority on government agendas worldwide because of the belief that education is a primary solution to many social and economic problems (Heck, 2004). In many countries, education reforms have been justified as promoting economic development and growth (Sahlberg, 2006); this justification is due to the massive role and interference of many institutions—such as the OECD, the World Bank, and IMF—on education policies and education reforms (Ball, 2012). The narrative put forward by these organisations is that developing human capital can help achieve economic growth by increasing labour productivity (Harris & Jones, 2018; Sahlberg, 2006). These institutions and other consulting firms convinced the AGS rulers of this narrative, and most reforms were based on this idea (Mohamed, 2019). However, Postman (1996) suggested that the assumption that ‘education and productivity go hand in hand’ is overdrawn (p. 30). Similarly, Wolf (2002) argued that the link between education and economic growth is a myth; he stated that

the one-way relationship in the mindsets of politicians, as in ‘education spending in, economic growth out – simply doesn’t exist’ (Wolf, 2002, loc. 204). The situation in the AGS might be a good example of Wolf’s statement, as their education expenditures are considered some of the highest in the world; however, the return on economic growth is low (El-Kogali et al., 2017). There is more than one narrative regarding the purposes of education; hence, reforming the education system should begin by determining exactly what the state needs from education.

Education is not a standalone concept; it is influenced by social, political, and economic change (Freire, 1985). Education reform, accordingly, entails the reform of all other related concepts. Davies (1999) contended that ‘education change and reform require parallel and complementary changes and reform in other arenas’ (p. 3); this argument encapsulates the thesis of this article, which is that focusing solely on reforming the education system while maintaining the status quo in related matters, does not lead to successful implementation. In their work, Harris and Jones (2018) found that what matters most in education reform is not the design or the selection of the projects but instead the ‘contextually appropriate approaches to educational policy’ and that more attention needs to be paid to the context when implementing reforms. Therefore, announcing and implementing the reforms without first preparing the required context might not help achieve the intended outcomes.

Looking at the reforms from a political perspective is important because ‘questions about power and level of decision-making are central’ (Davies, 1999, p. 7). In that sense, Moe and Wiborg (2017) argued that ‘any serious effort to understand the world’s education systems needs to study, for any given nation, how power is structured within the politics of education—who wields political power, how they wield it’ (p. 4). Therefore, examining the education reforms in the AGS from a political perspective is crucial, highlighting the political matters that were avoided during these reforms because this perspective has been neglected (Mazawi, 2008).

Scholars have emphasised the political mechanisms and social circumstances in the process of education reform and its implementation (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Heck, 2004; Nitta, 2012; Portnoi, 2016; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997; Williams & Cummings, 2005). Education reforms in the AGS, as in other regions, have been especially perceived to be political projects (Mazawi & Sultana, 2010), and as Davies (1999) argued, education reform is a political and technical process. As such, the ruling establishments were involved directly, providing the momentum necessary to overcome internal resistance (Nolan, 2012). Nonetheless, the literature about the reforms in the region has typically focused more on technical issues than political ones (see, for example, Alsaleh, 2019; Barnowe-Meyer, 2013; Haslam, 2011, 2013; Kirk, 2014; Male & Al-Bazzaz, 2015; Weber, 2014).

Most of these reforms were driven by political agendas detached from schools' priorities and needs (Abi-Mershed, 2010; Bashshur, 2005; Mazawi, 2010). Abdel-Moneim (2016) concluded that most reforms – including educational reforms – aimed to gain legitimacy for the regimes and help them survive. Mazawi (2010) stated that some ‘consider these reforms as seeking primarily to “de-Islamize” and “Americanize” Arab education by minimizing, if not entirely avoiding, references to Islamic culture and texts’ (p. 214), while others found that the reforms were used as state branding (Alkhater, 2016; Mohamed, 2019). This might explain why Abdel-Moneim (2016) and Mazawi (2010) concluded that most educational reforms were unsustainable and failed to improve the education practice or successfully build a knowledge society.

A more in-depth look at the AGS educational reforms illustrates that they were mainly triggered and supported by international and Western agencies that criticised the local education arena (Akkary, 2010; Akkary & Rizk, 2014; Kirk, 2015; Mazawi, 2010; Mohamed, 2019). The response to these criticisms was to involve these agencies in the policymaking process, and the easiest way to do so was to borrow the reforms from them. Accordingly, policy borrowing, which has become a global phenomenon, became the main approach to reforming the education system in the region. Although several scholars have criticised it (Auld & Morris, 2014; Halpin & Troyna, 1995; Harris & Jones, 2018; Morris, 2012; Sahlberg, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, 2014), the region is sticking to this approach. Most of the educational reform agendas were produced and packaged by outsiders and then delivered to

the region to be followed as a means of solving their educational problems (Alfadala, 2015; Donn & Al Manthri, 2013; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010; Mohamed, 2019; Rohde & Alayan, 2012).

Mohamed (2019) studied this approach in depth and concluded that what happened in the region was far from the borrowing policies of other countries around the world; this was more about buying these practices from more advanced educational systems and adopting them wholesale, despite the huge variations in the context. In other words, it was a trading process between the AGS and the consultant agencies, making the reforms more replication than true innovation (Kirk, 2015). Moreover, when these borrowed policies are implemented, they have already become outdated in the places where they originated (Donn & Al Manthri, 2013). Also, this approach neglected the epistemological conflicts between the region and the borrowed practices (Romanowski, Alkhateeb, & Nasser, 2018), thus creating massive implementation issues (Alfadala, 2015). Furthermore, Alhashem and Alhouti (2021) argued that this lack of implementation was due to the lower calibres of Ministry of Education (MOE) officials and their inability to understand and implement the reforms as designed.

Davies (1999) argued that 'planning for educational reforms should be done only in relation to the social, political and economic realities of that time and place, and must be done to gain the interest and support of the relevant national and local leaders' (p. 3). Also, Mazawi (2010) warned that because so many reforms in the region were led by international and Western consultant

agencies, there was an increased 'dependency on practices and technologies developed elsewhere and imported into the Arab region as part of free trade agreements, [and] as consumer-ready packages under the banner of promoting a knowledge society' (p. 212). This uncritical adoption of Western educational practices, and whether they improved education, is questionable.

The literature on education reform in the region illustrates that these reforms still need to achieve their goals, and it definitely illustrates shortcomings in both policymaking processes and policy implementation. This paper attempts to study the reforms from a political angle, a perspective that needs to be addressed in the literature in this area. Studying these reforms from a holistic point of view and looking at the political mechanism might help explain why reforms are not successfully achieving their goals. One way to do this is by looking at untouchable matters and considering redlines in reforming the education system.

### **A note on methodology and research**

Researching the educational reforms in the Gulf region, the huge investment in these projects, and their limited success attracted my attention. They caused me to ask why this is the case in the Gulf region. Why are we spending a lot and achieving little, and what went wrong with the reforms? This paper does not claim to answer these questions fully. Still, it provides part of the story by looking at the reform from a political perspective and identifying the matters that were never changed while reforming these



education systems. To develop this research, I found the question-driven approach developed by Punch and Oancea (2014) to be the most suitable; this starts with a research question that needs an answer instead of starting with a paradigm. Accordingly, this paper raised the following question:

**Which matters were considered redlines in reforming the education system in the Arab Gulf States, and did that affect the success of the reforms?**

This paper applied the qualitative comparative approach, which allowed me to look at several cases in the region to find similarities in how they approached and designed education reform. This comparison identified the untouchable areas that were considered redlines to those leading the reforms.

This research adopted the case-oriented approach established by Ragin (2014), which is centrally concerned with making sense of a relatively small number of cases. In this type of methodology, ‘cases are singular entities selected for their significance, and they are studied intensively and contextually’ (Ragin, 1994, p. 302). This comparative approach allowed me to focus on each country in depth and provide answers through a few detailed, intensive observations. Furthermore, the AGS share many commonalities – in terms of history, politics, economy, and other contexts – so this comparative approach is well-suited for this study because focusing on countries in one specific region effectively controls for those features that are common to them (Landman & Carvalho,

2017). Specifically, this paper focused on Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait only due to size limitations.

The sources of data for this research included policy documents and grey literature, or literature that is not formally published as an academic source like books or journal articles (Lefebvre, Manheimer and Glanville, 2008); grey literature includes government reports, consultant reports, theses, commercial documents, and other official documents (Grey Literature Report, 1999). Thus, a range of policy documents and reports related to Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait were reviewed and analysed carefully to ascertain untouchable matters. Lin (2016) argued that ‘secondary documents can foster your understanding of contextual characteristics and causal relationships leading to background meaning to support the analysis, interpretation, and audits of data’ (p. 171). Accordingly, document analysis and document interrogation were adopted in this research to manage and analyse the data, as these two methods are commonly used in educational and comparative research (Cortazzi, 2002; Male, 2016; Landman & Carvalho, 2017).

### **The redlines in reforming the education system in the Arab Gulf States**

While studying the education reforms in the AGS, I recognised that some matters appeared untouchable. Although policymakers seemed interested in reforming the education system, some issues in the political mechanisms still needed to be addressed, despite

being crucial for reforming the education system successfully. In other words, which political matters did the policymakers not tolerate delving into when designing education reform initiatives? Avoiding these matters and not changing the approach to reforming the education system might explain why reform processes were less successful and why the region remained in reform status for so long. This short article cannot highlight all these matters, so I will illustrate and discuss those that I believe to be most important, such as the extensive involvement of the ruling establishment, the over-reliance on international and foreign consultants, and the failure to tackle political and bureaucratic challenges.

#### *The extensive involvement of the ruling establishment*

The political systems in this region are some of the most centralised in the world; due to the regional political structures, the ruling establishments hold the ultimate power to formulate and implement all policies (Alnaqeeb, 2006; Herb, 1999; Khalaf & Luciani, 2006; Nonneman, 2006). When it came to reforming their education systems, the rulers were extensively involved in the process, making these reforms closely associated with them.

The extensive involvement of the ruler in all matters in the state was totally understandable when it was considered a clan state; however, after the shift to a modern state and the establishment of its institutions, this should no longer be the situation. For example, when Kuwait's merchants decided to open the first formal school in 1911, they sought the blessing and support of the

ruler's son, Shaikh Nasser bin Mubarak. Also, when Kuwait established its first educational institution, *Dairat Almaaraf* (Education Council), in 1936, Shaikh Abdullah Aljaber Alsabah took the lead in this institution. This extensive involvement in education remains sacrosanct; to this day, the AGS ruling establishments are heavily involved in reforming the education system, and their involvement constitutes a redline in the reform mechanism, meaning that the education sector cannot launch any comprehensive reform without their involvement.

We saw this very clearly in the cases of Bahrain and Qatar, whose Crown Princes led the reform initiatives directly. In Bahrain, HRH Prince Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa launched the reform and kept himself too close to the decision-making (Mohamed, 2019). In Qatar, HRH Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and his mother, the First Lady, HRH Moza bint Nasser Al-Missned, co-led the Supreme Education Council (SEC), and RAND – the consultant firm working in the reform – even took the Palace as a workplace (Brewer et al., 2007). What was interesting in Qatar was that in 1997, before the Education for a New Era (EFNE) initiative, the MOE had proposed a similar reform plan. Still, no action was taken on their proposal (Alkhater, 2016).

The involvement of the ruling establishment indeed provides the political support needed to implement the reforms; it encourages the main stakeholders and the rest of the citizens to buy into the reform and makes it a national matter. However, this extensive involvement has consequences.

One of these consequences is that it shields the reform projects from any criticism. The reform initiatives become associated with His Royal Highness, so any critique of the reform means a critique of His Royal Highness. In the AGS context, it is very hard, and sometimes impossible, to criticise the ruling establishment or its actions; some states even have laws banning any criticism of the ruling establishment's actions and decisions.

This might explain why when Bahrain's Crown Prince decided to abolish the College of Education and establish a new teacher college, no one in Bahrain criticised this decision; today, that newly established college is struggling and not performing as expected. Also, when Qatar decided to adopt the American charter school system, no one criticised this decision even though the consultant had not fully disclosed the weakness of this model in the US (Alkhater, 2016). I believe these decisions might have been more functional if educators had been given the space to voice their opinions in the first place, in which case there would definitely have been other options suggested for solving the weakness of the education system.

Secondly, the circle of the ruling establishment is too closed, with no one else involved in the decision-making; therefore, educational stakeholders such as school leaders, teachers, and parents were never involved in the decision-making process. The advantage of involving stakeholders and interest groups at the outset of policy formation is that their engagement may make the implementation

much easier and the policy more acceptable to those who must implement it (Taylor et al., 1997). For example, when Kuwait's MOE decided to reform the curriculum and introduce a competency-based curriculum, teachers were not asked whether they were ready to deliver this type of reform or not, and even the education colleges were not invited to discuss whether they could incorporate this type of curriculum in their teacher training (Alhashem & Alhouti, 2021; Winokur, 2014). In Qatar as well, the SEC – the leading body of the reform – included several stakeholders (Brewer et al., 2007) but none of them represented the main educational stakeholders.

More than 70 years after establishing the education system, the ruling establishments still could not accept the idea of allowing these stakeholders (school leaders, teachers, and parents) a formal role and considering them vital players in the decision-making process. Generally, teachers in the region should be addressed and allowed to establish unions. In Kuwait, considered the most democratic regime in the region, the Kuwait Teachers Society is not considered a union and is not permitted to undertake any political role. In Qatar, teaching is not considered a profession governed by law; hence, teachers cannot have a professional society. Given this background, it is unsurprising that stakeholders will not buy into the reforms and smooth their implementation path (Weber, 2014) because they feel they need to be part of this reform. If policymakers are really interested in successfully implementing educational reforms, these

stakeholders need to participate in the decision-making process, and the ruling establishment must recognise their role.

### *The over-reliance on international and foreign consultants*

Whenever an education reform is announced in the region, we educators ask who the consultant is this time because the number of Western consultants involved in education reform in the AGS is uncountable. In Bahrain, there were four different consultants from three countries: England, Scotland, and Singapore (EDB, 2006), while in Qatar, nine consultants—from the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Germany—worked on several projects (Brewer et al., 2007). In Kuwait, the consultants included McKinsey & Company, Tony Blair Associates, the British Council, Singapore's NIE, and finally the World Bank (Alhashem & Alhouti, 2021; Blair, 2009; British Council, 2007; McKinsey & Company, 2007; National Institute of Education, 2013). How can we expect coherent reforms if all these different firms from different backgrounds take the lead in designing them?

Over the past 20 years, the region has come to rely heavily on foreign consultants. These consulting firms – mostly Western – are granted unrestricted access to all educational institutions, including those of higher education, and the ruling establishment provides them access to statistics and policy reports, reinforcing them with the political support to implement their evaluations. In contrast, native educators and scholars are often denied this kind

of access and support, which indicates a lack of confidence in the local expertise to handle the reforms.

It was understandable to rely on foreign consultants when first establishing the education system in the 1940s and 1950s, when most AGS borrowed their education systems from Egypt and other Arab states (Alfadala, 2015; Ridge, 2014), for the state did not yet have the appropriate human capital and national expertise. However, after more than 60 years, the state should have enough well-educated and well-educated national educators to handle the reform instead of foreign consultants—especially given the international scholarship programmes that many AGS governments provide to citizens in the educational field. Despite dozens of research studies arguing against this reliance on foreign consultants and demonstrating the invalidity of the policy borrowing approach(see, for example: Alkhater, 2016; Donn & Al Manthri, 2013; Kirk, 2014, 2015; Mohamed & Morris, 2019; Romanowski et al., 2018), the ruling establishments continue to rely on them, and they consider this issue a redline. Whenever we struggle with our education system, we go directly to seek help from these consultants, asking them to diagnose our problems and provide the solutions – regardless of their lack of understanding of the context; in some cases, the consultants are even asked to evaluate their work, as was the case with RAND in Qatar.

The state leaders justify this reliance on foreign consultants as a transitional step towards building the national capital and transferring the knowledge and expertise into the local context.



But the reality is much different; the foreign consultants are engaged in all matters, even acting as shadows to the Ministers of Education (Mohamed, 2019). Instead of being discussed with local educational experts, the policy solutions are produced and packaged by these foreign consultants and provided to the region to be followed as a means of solving its educational problems (Alfadala, 2015; Donn & Al Manthri, 2013; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010; Rohde & Alayan, 2012). Most of the borrowed solutions are not contextualised to fit the region and therefore do not work well here because they were designed to solve a problem in its original context, not to be transferred wholesale to solve others' problems.

As mentioned above, these consultants were given the liberty to redesign the education systems based on their own understanding of education rather than on what the AGS and their citizens require. They attempted to fix the problems that they thought needed solutions, not those that needed to be solved. Therefore, the firms drew from reform projects that had succeeded elsewhere in the world and applied them in the region, regardless of their applicability to local circumstances. The problem with this approach is that it presumes that best practices can be standardised and exported to countries with diverse socio-economic and political systems; however, the literature shows that this is not possible (Donn & Al Manthri, 2013; Harris & Jones, 2018; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, 2014). To be realistic, there is nothing wrong with seeking help from experts with knowledge and experience in reforming and developing education practices; the problem is giving them the right to make decisions instead of local

experts. One way to make this approach more successful would be to bring the foreign consultants and the local expertise to sit together at the same table to think about, discuss, and negotiate what is best for the region regarding education reform.

### *The neglect of political and bureaucratic challenges*

As discussed above, the political arena inevitably has an influence on any education reforms. Such reforms became a political matter not only in the AGS but around the world, yet when we come to the AGS, we recognise that the political context needed to be taken into consideration. When the ruling establishments decided to reform their education systems, they confined the scope of the reform to the education system only. From their point of view, political matters were not related to the reform, and this was illustrated by the way they handled it.

For example, in Kuwait, the high turnover among Ministers of Education should have been considered when reforming the education system. From the time Kuwait announced its education reform and started its collaboration with the World Bank, there were around eight different ministers in charge of the MOE (Council of Ministers General Secretariat, 2019); this created instability in the body leading the reform and definitely affected its implementation. The problem was not only that eight different ministers led the reform over nine years, but that this also meant eight different sets of interrupted visions, processes, and practices. This huge turnover at the ministerial level was due to the political

dilemma that Kuwait has faced since it gained independence and established its constitution in 1961 (Alnajjar, 2000; Alnajjar & Selvik, 2016; Ghabra, 1994).

The World Bank (2014) highlighted this issue very clearly in their achievement report, stating, “[we] saw six different administrations take office during a 4-year period. The constant transition made decision-making at the most senior level difficult, stalling decisions at key moments in the program’s trajectory” (p. 22). Yet the ruling establishment did nothing to solve this issue and to ensure the stability of the administration leading the reform.

Here I argue that the political issue in Kuwait is considered a redline by the ruling establishment and was not considered when reforming the education system, even though it was affecting the implementation of the reforms. As discussed earlier, system-wide reforms are a long-term process, taking years if not decades, to achieve results (Bruns et al., 2019). Therefore, ensuring the stability of leadership is crucial in reforming the education system.

Likewise, the regional bureaucratic context was also ignored. The civil service in general, and the ministries of education in particular, are weak in terms of performance and policy implementation; the system has been described as dysfunctional due to a range of issues such as overstaffing, low-skilled personnel, low productivity, red tape, and a lack of innovation (Ayubi, 1990; Jabbra & Jabbra, 2005; Jreisat, 2012). The ruling establishments are, of course, aware of this situation. Still, instead

of tackling these problems, they established parallel governmental bodies that allowed for 'bureaucratic manoeuvring' to overcome the rigidities of the traditional bureaucratic institutions (Abdel-Moneim, 2016). In Bahrain and Qatar, for example, the MOE did not lead the reform; instead, the SEC in Qatar and the Education Reform Board (ERB) in Bahrain took the lead (Brewer et al., 2007; EDB, 2006).

Several scholars have argued that the capacity of technocrats to carry out the reform may have an impact on the way policies are designed and implemented (Akiba, 2013; Alhashem & Alhouti, 2021; Bruns et al., 2019; Harris & Jones, 2018), but reforming the bureaucratic structure seems to be a redline for the AGS ruling establishments. Although the states established these new parallel institutions to design and plan the reforms, the MOE would still be in charge of their implementation. Because the state had not reformed the MOEs or developed their low-calibre staff to be more capable of implementing the reform initiatives the way the parallel governmental bodies had designed them, these initiatives were lacking in implementation due to the huge gap between the designers of the reform and its implementers.

What was surprising was that while the consultants did raise these issues, they still needed to propose solutions or push for them to be resolved. My interpretation as to why these two issues were ignored is that the consultants knew in advance that these issues were not only redlined for the ruling establishments but were also very hard to solve. Therefore, they did not push to include them in

the reform as a priority; instead, they proposed alternatives that they could be sure to deliver. Reforming the MOEs is a complex and long-term task, as RAND argued in their report (Brewer et al., 2007); thus, the consultants chose the easiest and fastest approach, even if it was not the best approach for delivering the reform.

## **Conclusion**

Over the last decades, the AGS has been making significant efforts, spending millions of dollars, and consulting with an enormous number of consultants on school reforms, to develop their human capital to diversify the economy, by building a knowledge economy to ensure the sustainability of the welfare system. However, since we entered this millennium, these education systems have been moving from one reform to another, while partial changes are observed which need to reflect the amount of effort. This article concludes that it is insufficient to set up a reform plan for the education system while keeping other, closely related matters unreformed.

As Davies (1999) argued, successful reform of the education system requires parallel and complementary reform in other areas as well. This article illustrates that the AGS failed to fulfil this requirement in that some matters that are closely related to education reform were not reformed or even touched. This has affected the success of reforms and kept the education system in reform status for a long time.

The involvement of the ruling establishment in the reform process is highly appreciated as it provides the needed political support. However, their extensive involvement in every matter related to the reform is not doing any good because it keeps the reforms isolated from the educators, who cannot interact with the project or provide their criticism of some of its initiatives. The over-reliance on foreign consultants needs to be reconsidered, for they are looking at their interests rather than fixing our education systems. Looking at solutions from around the world will not develop the education system in the region. Instead, putting faith in local experts to think about the solutions that would work well in the AGS context might be the way out of our educational crisis.

Literature on education reforms makes it very clear that contextual change is crucial in achieving successful and sustained educational reforms. Therefore, more effort must be made to reform the context and prepare the appropriate bureaucratic and political infrastructure to help the reform succeed. Reforming the education system requires a paradigm shift in the reform approach and a breaking free from any boundaries. With this shift, it is easier to reform and develop the education system in the region. We have tried the old approach several times, and it has not worked, so it is clear that repeating the same approach will not bring any different results. This paper calls on policymakers and educators to seriously consider the contextual and political dimensions and boundaries when imagining, articulating, and implementing future education reform initiatives.

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