In many parts of the Arab world, as throughout the world generally, exit exam results make front-page news. In Jordan the release of exam scores is accompanied by gun-shots fired into the air in celebration – an illegal, but common, and occasionally deadly, practice. In Morocco, baccalaureate exam (known colloquially as Bac) results are the leading story on the evening news, and mothers are shown joyfully ululating as they see their children’s names on the list of those who have passed. When I was living in Lebanon in June 2016, I received a notification on my cell phone from a major Lebanese newspaper, announcing that exam results were now available online – a testament to their “Breaking News” status. This national concern with exam scores and effusive nature of celebrations might seem surprising to those unfamiliar with the region, but it reflects the weight that these exams carry in young people’s lives.

Around the world the shift to a knowledge-based economy means that higher education is closely linked to the goal of professional employment. Governments face pressures to expand access to higher education and have increased enrolments significantly. Yet, admissions systems in much of the Middle East and North Africa, like those in many post-colonial states, were created in an earlier era of elite access. They must now cope with increased pressures for enrolment. Critics argue that centralized and exam-based admissions are relics of an older era and should be updated in line with changing higher education needs. From an educational perspective, they argue that exit exams incentivize rote memorization instead of critical thinking or skill development. From an economic perspective, the high stakes incentivize corruption throughout the system, from teachers withholding instruction in order to encourage private tutoring, to ministry officials selling exam questions. One key policy recommendation is to reform
the exams themselves, reorienting them away from memorization and towards a demonstration of the competencies that are rewarded by knowledge-intensive economies. Critics of centralized decision making advocate the devolution of decision-making power to the institutional level to give public universities more autonomy over how many students they can accept.

These recommendations, though important, ignore the reality that admission to higher education in the Arab world is not simply an educational or bureaucratic matter; it is political. National admissions policies are a highly visible instance of direct state intervention in young people’s lives, and as a result they can be difficult and politically risky to alter. For the state, admission to university is not just a process of determining academic preparedness but also a process of gatekeeping and even social engineering (Reiter, 2002). For individual students and families, specific admissions decisions are even more consequential. A single test can sort students into future life paths and determine who receives the social status and economic power associated with a particular degree.

In this chapter I show how admissions systems reflect broader socio-political contracts between the state and society, classifying countries into three broad categories: centrally controlled admission based on the logic of meritocratic exit exams, found in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia, and Morocco; open admissions based on a logic of capacity building, found in the Arab Gulf states; and institution-specific admissions based on the market mechanisms of supply and demand, found in Lebanon.

I argue that each model results from the institutionalization of historical patterns, which limit current reform options. In the case of exam-based systems, the logic of meritocracy has been undermined by structural inequalities, privatization, and politically motivated affirmative-action policies. And yet, official, if hollow, commitments to meritocracy through testing remain entrenched. In response, young people and their families are actively contesting the role of the state in dictating student futures and are reasserting agency over their lives by cheating extensively on exams, relying on informal networks to evade official policies, or paying to attend private universities.

Even in countries where admission is not based on competitive exit exams, including the Arab Gulf states and Lebanon, the structure of admission to higher education sheds light on important political calculations. In the Arab Gulf states, competency assessments allow all citizens who meet minimum criteria to study in some form of higher education. Under the logic of capacity building, even those who do not qualify for higher education can enrol in a pre-university academic
bridge program that prepares them for university. This expectation-free social service forms part of a social contract that is premised on the distribution of natural resource wealth from rulers to nationals, and as a result it has been difficult for governments to eliminate it. In contrast, admissions decisions in Lebanon’s highly privatized system, where students enrol directly in institutions, has permitted significant self-sorting by religious sect and social class. Although the lack of state involvement in young people’s lives protects the government from being the target of students’ anger, it also reflects and perpetuates a widespread lack of faith in the Lebanese state.

Access for All

Countries around the world are incorporating growing cohorts of young people into their higher education systems, and the Arab world is no exception. This trend towards greater access is part of broad global shifts away from viewing higher education as the domain of elites to seeing it as desirable and worthwhile for all. In earlier eras universities were designed to educate small cohorts of elites to be political and cultural leaders. In the post-colonial era, widespread cultural shifts at the global level entrenched the belief that education is both a fundamental right and a means to individual prosperity and national development (Ramirez, 2012; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Access to higher education became linked to modernization and its possibilities of upward social mobility. The great promise of modernity is that individual humans have agency to determine their own life paths, rather than accept that their place in society is inherited and immutable. Meritocracy through the formal educational system has been central to the modernization project, by promising to reward hard work and intelligence.

In the twenty-first century, knowledge economy discourses have further advanced the belief that higher education is necessary and important for ever larger cohorts of youth. Higher education’s role in supporting development was cemented in 2015 when countries around the world endorsed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4, the global goal for education, states that by 2030 all member states, including Arab nations, will “ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university” (UN, 2015, p. 21). The adoption of the SDGs has now tied access to higher education to global development objectives more closely than ever before.

These global shifts are actively endorsed by Arab governments and students alike, and the goal of expanded access to higher education is
rarely questioned. As a result, national governments must figure out how to balance this demand for higher education with the competing demands on national budgets, raising important questions over how to regulate access. The pressure on Arab states to admit more students to university, coupled with an intense burden on high-school students in the region to achieve higher and higher marks, comes down to a simple question of supply and demand: students versus seats.

Moreover, although the myth of meritocracy places great faith in the ability of the educational system to produce upward social mobility, nowhere in the world are educational systems truly meritocratic. In reality, higher education maintains and reproduces inequalities, rather than eliminating them. Sociologists point out that the middle and upper classes are thought to have “superior material and cultural assets” (Brown, 2013, p. 682). In the Arab world, as elsewhere, students from wealthy families and urban centres have always had educational and cultural advantages: they are more likely to have access to trained teachers and well-resourced schools. They are increasingly likely to have access to high-quality, expensive private schools and to those that teach in Western languages or rely on foreign curricula, which gives students an advantage on exit exams.

As access to higher education expands, previously excluded students have been able to enrol, including women; ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities; those from rural communities; and the poor. Sociologists of education, however, have consistently shown that it is the privileged classes that are in the best position to reap the benefits of the expansion (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). The wealthy not only disproportionately gain access to new seats in university but also obtain qualitatively better forms of education, including prestigious degrees, elite institutions, and competitive scholarships. More recently, they have also been more likely to pursue advanced degrees. In other words, despite rapidly growing enrolments in higher education, equality of opportunity is not necessarily improving. These global trends of both access and inequality have been borne out in the Arab world. In the following section I discuss how different countries in the region structure their admissions to higher education and how the pressures to expand access have played out.

The Exit Exam as Meritocracy

Admission to higher education in most Arab countries is based on high-stakes, centrally co-ordinated, secondary-school exit exams adapted from French and British models of the French baccalaureate
and British A levels. Countries including Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Morocco use these exit exams to regulate the number of students entering higher education, by adjusting how many students qualify for admission. Their higher education admissions are based on a foundational logic of meritocracy, the idea that opportunities for social mobility should be based on the combination of academic ability and hard work, not on inherited or ascribed characteristics such as gender, race, or family wealth. In the theoretical literature, merit is often defined as the combination of ability and effort, although there are normative debates over whether ability should be defined as proven ability or potential ability (Stone, 2013).

In practice, in most Arab nations, merit is understood in a straightforward, if simplistic, way as performance on a nation-wide standardized exam. In their initial iteration these tests aimed to counter the colonialist legacies that reserved higher education for the wealthy and well-connected. Standardized exit exams were originally conceived of as allowing the best and the brightest throughout the country to access university education and public-sector positions (Cohen, 2004).

In 1952, Egypt’s military leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, staged a successful coup d’état, seizing power from the corrupt, spendthrift, and ineffective monarch, King Faruq, and setting in motion the process that transformed Egypt from a monarchy to an independent republic. Nasser’s revolution was based on populist and nationalist ideals and promoted a vision of Arab nationalism that countered the highly unequal and corrupt colonial regimes. In line with these ideals, Nasser ushered in wide-ranging economic and social reforms that had “enormous ripple effects on all other institutions of the society and on the day-to-day lives of citizens” (Nagi & Nagi, 2011, p. 8). The 1956 constitution, passed by popular consent, guaranteed universal education and employment. The 1971 constitution stated: “Education is a right guaranteed by the State.” State intervention in the economy was founded on a logic of state-led development and comprehensive economic planning. Article 23 of the 1971 constitution committed the country to organizing the national economy through a “comprehensive development plan which ensures the growth of the national income, fair distribution, higher living standards, elimination of unemployment, [and] the increase of job opportunities.” By expanding opportunities for higher education and government employment, the public education system was crucial to meeting these aspirations. National secondary-school exit exams were established to determine placement in higher education institutions. Other important reforms included guarantees of admission to higher education for all secondary-school graduates, the elimination of tuition
fees at all levels of education, and the guarantee of public-sector employment for all university graduates (Cupito & Langsten, 2011; Rugh, 2002). Admission to technical, vocational, and university education programs was also geared to key industries and economic needs.

As the most populous Arab nation, and the political home of the burgeoning Arab nationalist movement, Egypt served as a model for most Arab nations in the post-independence era, particularly in areas of social and economic policy. Admissions systems in many, but not all, Arab nations were based on the Nasser model, with strong commitments to free, universal higher education linked to public-sector positions, based on seemingly meritocratic exit exams.

Students’ pathways through the education system reflect merit-based rationales, and each transition to a higher level is based on a standardized national examination. In Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Morocco students sit for an exam at the end of preparatory school (i.e., grade nine), which determines upper-secondary-school track placement: either the academic track, which is a prerequisite for university, or the vocational track, where students specialize in occupationally oriented programs, such as commerce.

The number of students accepted into each track is set by the educational priorities of the day, with the ministries of education often imposing a fixed number of places available in the academic track. During the 1990s, roughly 50 per cent of students in Egypt were tracked into vocational education following the final exams in primary or lower secondary school (World Bank, 2008b). In recent years, as countries have focused on increasing access to higher education, the percentage of students attending academic secondary schools has risen – from about 45 per cent to 65 per cent in Egypt. In general, only students sorted into the general, or academic, track will have the opportunity to continue on to university. Vocational secondary schools are widely considered to be “second-class” schools, and the transition from a vocational secondary school to university is rare (Richards, 1992; World Bank, 2008b).

Within academic secondary schools, students are tracked into concentrations – typically, a mathematics and science track or an arts and humanities track – and some nations also have other tracks such as information technology (e.g., Syria) or a mixed pathway that includes both mathematics and science, and arts and humanities (e.g., Lebanon). In all Arab countries, the scientific and technical fields are considered to be more difficult and of higher status due to their difficulty of entry, which has reinforced hierarchies of majors and concentrations, with medicine and engineering at the top. In North Africa, tracking also maps onto linguistic differences. As scientific subjects are taught in French in
university, and literary subjects in Arabic, the ability to succeed in scientific streams often requires near fluency in French (Boutieri, 2016).

At the end of upper secondary school, which lasts for three years (from grades ten to twelve), students in the academic track sit for an exit exam. In Egypt the official name for the exam is the Academic Secondary Certificate Examination, but it is commonly referred to as *thanawiya amma* ("general secondary," in Arabic). In Jordan the exit exam is known as the *tawjihi* ("orientation," in Arabic). In Syria and Lebanon and throughout North Africa the exam is referred to as the baccalaureate, or colloquially as "the Bac," after the French model.

These exams are not easy, and many teachers and parents have noted that they have become more difficult over time to restrict the number of students who can enter higher education and competitive careers. In 2012 only about 50 per cent of the students who sat for the tawjihi in Jordan passed the test; in the 2014 and 2015 summer sessions only 41 per cent of students passed (Adely, 2012). Similarly, slightly less than 50 per cent of Moroccan students passed the Bac in 2012 ("Résultats du Bac," 2012).

Performance on this secondary-exit examination determines the higher education options that are available to young people, and university placement involves a somewhat opaque process of matching university places with student preferences and student positions, in the distribution of the exit exam. In Jordan, Egypt, and Syria students are given a small number of options for universities and majors based on their score. In Tunisia, where students also take an exam known as the baccalaureate (*al-bakaluria*, Arabic), admissions decisions take into consideration both students’ exit exam scores and their marks in their last three years of secondary school (el-Meehy, 2015). Students submit their top choices for their program of study, and are matched in waves based on their preferences and the field-specific quotas set by the ministry: those in the top wave are more likely to get their first choice, and subsequent waves are placed in less-in-demand programs and concentrations.

Gaining admission to prestigious or competitive programs is extremely difficult. In Jordan and Syria the public university system has strict requirements for admittance into each discipline, and prestigious programs such as medicine and engineering can require nearly perfect scores. Across the region those whose scores are not high enough for them to attend a university may be tracked into two-year intermediate institutes that provide training in an applied field such as informatics or bookkeeping.

One key difference between North Africa and the Levant (the historical region of greater Syria) is the idea of universal access. In North African systems, secondary-degree holders are legally guaranteed admission to university. In many cases promises of free and guaranteed access to
higher education are built into national constitutions. In some countries, including Tunisia and Algeria, not only are students guaranteed admission and free tuition, but many also receive cost-of-living allowances. This is not the case in Jordan and Syria, where access to university is determined by exam score, and some secondary students graduate but do not meet the minimum scores to enter university (Malkawi, 2014). Jordanian admissions are also complicated by the country’s demographics: there is unmet demand for higher education among urban Jordanians of Palestinian origin, for whom admission to the subsidized public sector is very competitive, a point discussed later in the chapter.

That said, the admission guarantees in most North African systems apply only to the more generalist and less prestigious programs. They are also regulated in various ways; for example, in Morocco the admission guarantee only extends to the student’s home region. The more prestigious programs, with presumably better career prospects, require much higher scores on exams. For example, in Morocco admission to elite programs, such as medicine, also requires sitting for a separate program-specific entrance exam, known as the concours.

Despite the fundamental changes in Arab states and societies since Nasser’s revolution (as described in chapter 1), the centrally coordinated, exam-based admissions system remains largely unchanged in many countries. In principle, access to higher education is meritocratic, with the highest achieving students tracked into the most needed or most rigorous professions. In practice, students from urban and upper-class backgrounds are much more likely to transition to university for both educational and economic reasons. Indeed, public education in the Arab world has always been stratified along class, ethnic, linguistic, and geographic lines, yet standardized testing remains justified in popular media on the basis of its practical and universalizing properties. For example, in 2001, Egypt’s minister of higher education, Mufid Shebab, staunchly advocated for the examination system on both logistical and ideological grounds, stating that “the application system still has one significant virtue: equal opportunity” (“Crunching the numbers,” 2001).

**Criticisms of Exam-Based Admissions**

Today, as countries in the region transition away from state-led development to neoliberal economic models, the logic of centralized admissions systems has come under intense scrutiny. Knowledge economy discourses that advocate lifelong learning have also called for expanded access and for second-chance programs that allow young people to continually upgrade their skills.
International development professionals have routinely criticized the region’s centralized admissions systems, stating that they “promote memorization over investment in skills” (Dhillon & Yousef, 2011, p. 28). Similarly, in a 2013 Brookings publication on higher education in the region, the authors criticized the highly centralized nature of the process, noting that “student applications do not go to universities for consideration, but instead are sent to central government-run entities tasked with making decisions about which institution each applicant can attend” (Wilkens & Masri, 2011, p. 7). The authors recognized that admissions processes have social implications, including placing top students into sciences instead of liberal arts; they also criticized practices of accepting “unqualified students,” which contribute to low completion rates and become a drain on government resources.

Additionally, the policy of guaranteed admission in North African systems has been widely criticized since at least the 1980s. One critic explained that despite difficulties for planners, “outright abrogation of this principle is politically risky. Student groups and others argue that this guarantee is essential for socioeconomic justice and have reacted quickly to proposals for its elimination” (M.T. Jones, 1981, p. 318). Interviews that I conducted in 2013 reflected a similar sentiment but a different rationale: given governments’ fears over youth unrest in the wake of the Arab Spring, neither Morocco nor Tunisia was willing to increase tuition, limit enrolment, or decrease student aid.

Despite these criticisms, few feasible recommendations have been offered. Wilkens and Masri (2011) suggested that “more attention should be given to addressing the preparedness of secondary school graduates and applicants to universities” (p. 10). Possible efforts that they suggest include “the development of specialized exams, where appropriate, to assess language, reasoning, and thinking skills for admissions purposes” (p. 10). In other words, the key recommendation is “better tests,” which seems to ignore the much broader social and political ramifications of admissions systems. In contrast, I interpret exit exams as a highly consequential domain of state involvement in students’ lives.

The Many Social Consequences of Exams

The Rise of Private Tutoring

High-stakes exams have numerous unintended consequences. One very predictable and seemingly positive effect of high-stakes exams is that families will seek to obtain the best exam score for their children in the name of securing future opportunities. In practice, what
this means is that in the Arab region, like the rest of the world, families make use of their financial and cultural resources to secure those opportunities, often through private schooling or private tutoring for their children.

Since the 1990s, rates of private schooling have rapidly increased throughout the Arab world. Many families are sending their children to private schools, particularly those that teach in foreign (i.e., Western) languages or those that allow students to avoid taking the dreaded national exam by securing a foreign credential instead. However, given their expensive tuition, these schools are viewed by many as “elitist institutions catering to the privileged few” (Farag, 2012, p. 81).

In addition, the use of private tutors has become ubiquitous throughout the region, a phenomenon that Sobhy (2012) calls “de-facto privatization” (p. 47) (see also Hartmann, 2008, 2013; Herrera, 2008). The rise of private tutoring is a global phenomenon and has been called “a shadow educational system” in the comparative education literature (Bray, 2006). In Egypt an estimated 75 per cent of all secondary-school students use private tutoring, and an additional 22 per cent continue to use tutors in university (Elbadawy, 2014; Waterbury, 2020). Farag (2012) argues that in Egypt the use of private tutors has been increasing rapidly despite the fact that the Ministry of Education views private tutors “with disdain” and considers them to be taking resources away from the public system (p. 81). Others have lamented the fact that private tutoring in Egypt, as in many countries, has become “an undeniable fact of life for students” (Sieverding, Krafft, & Elbadawy, 2019, p. 562). Scholars point to a number of primary drivers of private tutoring: on the demand side, students and families seek a competitive advantage on exams or perceive the schooling to be of low quality; on the supply side, teachers may encourage tutoring as a way to supplement their own incomes (Sieverding et al., 2019).

In my time travelling in numerous countries throughout the region, I found concerns over private tutoring to be widespread. In Egypt the teachers whom I interviewed explained that some public-school teachers do not teach material fully, in order to compel their students to pay them for tutoring. Prior research has found this to be a common practice in the region, along with more extreme forms of coercion such as threats of expulsion (Hartmann, 2013; Sieverding et al., 2019; Sobhy, 2012). In the seemingly reverse situation, where parental pressure drove private tutoring, in interviews conducted by my colleague and me in Jordan, secondary-school students expressed concern that they were covering official material for exams during the summer with their private tutors and then were less motivated or attentive during the
school year (Buckner & Hodges, 2016). Alternatively, students might skip school to study with private tutors (Alayan, 2014).

The increasing reliance on private secondary education and private tutoring is a worrying trend because it may exacerbate inequalities and undermine the faith in and the quality of the public sector. Particularly when accompanied by declines in attention and in the quality of instruction in public schools, private tutoring has been called a “hidden cost” of ostensibly free educational systems (Sieverding et al., 2019). Given that families have various levels of resources to draw on to support their children, such practices invariably reproduce, and potentially exacerbate, socio-economic inequalities. Research in Egypt has found that rates of private tutoring increase with parental wealth and educational levels (Assaad & Krafft, 2015b; Elbadawy, 2009; Sayed & Langsten, 2014). Wealthy families also spend significantly more on private tutoring and ostensibly purchase “better” tutoring in the form of individualized rather than group lessons (Sieverding et al., 2019). Although concerns over private tutoring focus on its prevalence in primary and secondary schooling, its effects ripple through higher education systems because performance on exit exams determines admission to university. Research has found that throughout the region, students from wealthy families are much more likely to be found in higher education institutions overall, and particularly in prestigious fields that require high exam scores, such as medicine and engineering (Jackson & Buckner, 2016; Krafft & Alawode, 2018). Unsurprisingly, private tutoring has been called “an important barrier to equal opportunity in education” (Sieverding et al., 2019, p. 585).

Cheating and Connections

Another concerning consequence of high-stakes exams is the incentive to cheat, which is rampant in the Arab world, with cheating scandals frequently making national news. Prior research has found that cheating is common in the region. In a 2012 survey of 250 young people in the UAE, 78.0 per cent admitted to cheating, frequently facilitated by technology (Khan & Balasubramanian, 2012). Similarly, in a behaviour experiment, in which students were given the opportunity to cheat on a short and notably low-stakes quiz, C.W. Jones (2015) found that 48.8 per cent of high-school students in her sample cheated.

Cheating practices in the Arab world are similar to those used by young people elsewhere. Students bring in notes or exam answers written on clothing, water bottles, binders, desks, paper, or their skin. Some students receive answers by text message before or during the exam
through mobile phones. There are also rumours of novel and extreme methods. In a 2013 interview that I conducted in Jordan, one young Jordanian man who admitted to cheating told me that some students are using a new method: getting a small incision behind the ear to hide an earphone. Regardless of whether such practices actually exist, the rumour illustrates the lengths to which young people will go to cheat on exams. Such rumours may also help young people to justify their own comparatively mundane cheating practices.

Cheating on high-stakes exit exams reflects the complicated web of structural constraints and cultural norms that youth must navigate: their own interests and abilities, family and social pressures, and the formal education system. Perhaps most surprising to those who believe that cheating is a moral failure on the part of students, in many Arab nations parents, families, and other adults frequently help students to cheat. Even though stories and editorials in Jordan and Morocco regularly lament the moral and institutional failures that cheating represents (Ait Hammou, 2012), cheating occurs in plain sight of adults – from parents who allow students to congregate in their living rooms with clandestine tests, to shopkeepers who knowingly permit students to make photocopies of tests – sometimes with their direct help.

The educational topography of Arab nations, which differentially values disciplines, may foster an environment in which parents feel justified in supporting cheating. High marks on the exit exam can lead to high-paying and high-prestige careers, while low scores lead to careers in fields such as Islamic law and Arabic literature, which have low economic returns in the local economy. Parents may decide to help their children cheat on the exit exam, even if it requires a small investment in buying exam questions, instead of paying more money later for private universities or parallel university programs.

Teachers and exam proctors are also blamed for, or at least are considered complicit in, cheating. Teachers in Jordan are widely accused of selling both copies of exams and correct responses, as well as simply providing answers during examinations. In an interview that my colleague and I conducted in Jordan, one young woman told me that, although she herself never cheated on an exam, during the administration of her exam the proctor leaned in and told her, “Make sure you fill in the A clearly,” even though she had marked a B. Confused at first, she quickly understood that her teacher was telling her the correct answer. The role of teachers does not escape the notice of parents – even those who are critical of the culture of cheating. In another interview a Jordanian father of three said that the problem in schools was that teachers gave cigarettes to students, joked with them, and acted too informally: “If
the teachers were clean, there wouldn’t be any cheating. It’s them who answer the questions and send answers to the students … For material benefit they will sell their conscience. The teachers themselves are corrupt. It’s cheap to cheat because the teachers are cheap.” Teachers may benefit from cheating, either financially or socially, when large numbers of their students pass. Alternatively, some teachers may not want certain students to be in their classes again in the following year. The widespread involvement of adults in cheating schemes, however, suggests that there is a much larger socio-cultural fabric that shapes people’s motivations, opportunities, and justifications for cheating.

Of course, not all students cheat: C.W. Jones (2015) finds that attitudes to cheating vary significantly based on gender, wealth, and the particular academic setting. Interviews that a colleague and I conducted with young people in Morocco and Jordan revealed that the ethical status of cheating was a grey zone. Although some young people claimed that all cheating was inherently wrong, most did not see cheating in black-and-white terms; they did not necessarily consider it good, but they also did not see it as always wrong or unfair. Instead, their ideas about fairness reflected complicated notions of what they perceived to be fair and unfair in the larger context of their lives. In both countries students explained that cheating was fair if larger social structures were unfair. For example, one female university student in Morocco told me: “I’ve never cheated, but I know why they do it. I don’t judge them.” Similarly, Abdullah, a young man from the south of Jordan, explained that cheating the formal bureaucratic system was fair if it allowed individuals who would otherwise fail to pass the test. He was adamant that he himself never cheated, but he did not think that it was necessarily wrong for others to do so if it was their only recourse for a better life.

Although the formal educational system claims that citizens are sorted into different life paths for the sake of national development, some young people whom I interviewed said that high-stakes exams are not a legitimate basis for sorting, given the significant inequalities in teacher preparation, educational resources, and exposure to foreign languages at the primary- and secondary-school levels, among other factors. For example, Thami, a young man from Morocco who admitted that he and most of his friends cheated, explained, “We didn’t cheat the test. The test cheated us.” When pressed, Thami explained that students were not well prepared to take the Bac, but then they realized that its results would determine their entire futures. The general perception of “being cheated” was particularly strong among those from rural areas and lower socio-economic classes, who felt they had not received a high-quality education. These justifications for cheating reflect the
“hollowness” of the public educational project (Boutieri, 2012), in which state exams maintain a tight grip over young people’s future lives, but schools are viewed as not fully preparing them for these exams.

Nonetheless, Abdullah made the crucial distinction that cheating was not fair if it was used to secure a higher score, obtain a seat in a prestigious university program, and thereby deprive another student of that university seat. In this case he considered cheating to be unfair because it had a direct, negative effect on someone else’s life chances. Abdullah’s insight suggests that cheating merely to get ahead individually is still not culturally justifiable. This kind of nuanced interpretation of fairness suggests that, for many young people, cheating is only interpreted as fair or acceptable when it is directed towards larger social structures perceived as unfair. Given the significance of the exams, which students, teachers, and parents routinely said “determine your fate” or “mean everything,” cheating is one way that young people and their families attempt to reclaim agency over their lives.

Cheating clearly undermines the legitimacy of state-administered exams, which ultimately threatens the legitimacy of the education system itself and the state that is tasked with managing that system. Popular faith in testing, or lack thereof, reflects citizens’ trust in the state as a fair arbiter of future opportunity. In my time of living in Morocco I often found that students and parents felt that grading was arbitrary – from the ministry’s grading of Bac exams to university professors who had “power to pass or fail you based on nothing but their personal whims,” as one interviewee stated. In conversations Moroccans rarely use the personal pronoun I to speak about the baccalaureate, such as saying, “I got …” (hasalt a’ala …). Instead, in colloquial Moroccan Arabic, they externalize the exam grades by stating, “They gave me” (a’atawni). This externalization implicitly undermines the idea that students earned their score. The linguistic difference feeds into larger perceptions that the scores one gets on the Bac are somewhat random. In interviews Moroccans explained that “sometimes graders make mistakes” and that if students did not agree with their exam scores, they could go to the district office and ask for another grader, and for yet another after that. The process by which a different group of graders raise or lower scores perpetuates students’ lack of faith in the validity of grading. Boutieri (2016) notes that “the strategies of students, parents and teachers to circumvent the structural inequalities of the public education system through cheating, parallel lessons, and bribes reveal both their obligatory complicity … and their contempt for government recommendations regarding the official rules of meritocratic promotion” (p. 38).
Given the importance of meritocracy as a cornerstone of the Moroccan education system, upholding the idea of fair grading is a priority for the Moroccan state, and the Ministry of Education has made public examples of cheaters. News accounts have reported students being arrested for cheating (Arbaoui, 2012). In 2012, in response to answers being leaked on Facebook, the Ministry of Education “issued a decision to consider invalid all the answers similar to those posted on Facebook” (Flah, 2012). If caught cheating, students can be barred from taking the Bac for up to five years or even face prison sentences of up to three years (Bin Tayyib, 2013). Meanwhile, those caught facilitating cheating, either through selling answers or leaking exam questions, face severe penalties: anywhere from six months to five years in prison, or fines of 5,000–100,000 Moroccan dirhams (USD 500–10,000) (Arbaoui, 2016).

In the days leading up to the 2016 Bac, news reports announced that the authorities had caught ninety-one people trying to leak answers to the Bac through social media sites. As a sign of the perceived seriousness of cheating, incidents are investigated as crimes by police, rather than simply being handled by educational officials. In June 2016 the Moroccan parliament passed a law to crack down on cheating, which was timed to align with the opening of that year’s Bac. In announcing the law, Khalid Barjaoui, minister delegate to the minister of national education and vocational training, stated that its goal was to “anchor the values of fairness and equality of opportunity” (al-Youm, 2016). The ministry also claims to be taking a strict stance against cheating by publishing the names of students caught cheating, to “protect the creditability of the Moroccan Baccalaureate” (al-Youm, 2016). Many articles in national newspapers feature crackdowns on cheating in the days leading up to and during the examination period. I interpret these harsh penalties as the ministry’s attempt to reassert the legitimacy of its exams and, in turn, itself.

Attempts to crack down on cheating are not restricted to Morocco but are widespread throughout the region. In 2016 the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education reported that it was reforming the testing system after 55 per cent of a sample of students confessed to cheating on exams in 2015 (“Cheating,” 2015). Part of the reform measures included video-monitoring all exam rooms and decentralizing the examination process. Similarly, in 2016 the Egyptian government was embarrassed by a cheating scandal and in the following year introduced new exam booklets to prevent online cheating.

Not all countries have cracked down to the same extent, however. In ethnographic interviews conducted with young people in Jordan, Adely, Haddad, al-Husban, and al-Khoshman (2019) found that the
students generally “accepted tawjihi results as a product of their own efforts rather than the quality of their education” (p. 81). Specifically, when students discussed their experiences of taking the tawjihi, they tended to emphasize their “own abilities and weaknesses as students, or personal and familial crises they faced while studying for the exam” (p. 88). Unlike in Morocco, interviews in Jordan revealed that the legitimacy of grading was not the primary issue; respondents stated that the “grading was fair” because it was done by ministry officials. Rather, concerns over cheating came to a head in the examination hall. According to Jordanian news reports, there is often an expectation that proctors will allow blatant cheating (even to the extent that some tribes have used a loudspeaker to read out answers near an examination centre) (al-Shawabke, 2012). Thwarted attempts at cheating have resulted in mass anger and violent outbursts. In the 2012 winter session of tawjihi exams in Karak, a city in the south of Jordan, a mob of two hundred students and family members attacked a police precinct with rocks after a man attempting to help students cheat was ejected from the school. At around the same time, a large group of students and parents in Amman attacked the car of one exam monitor who had not allowed cheating, and critically injured his wife (Azzeh, 2013).

In Jordan the use of violence in educational spaces is not unique to secondary schools. Tribal rivalries and affirmative-action policies are largely responsible for the widespread outbreaks of violence on Jordanian university campuses; these are particularly common in the more rural southern governorates and map onto a long-standing distinction between urban Palestinians and rural Jordanians. The young people I interviewed in Amman explained that students from tribal areas might be more likely to cheat because they were less prepared for the exam than were Palestinian-Jordanians living in urban areas, where secondary schools are of higher quality. Importantly, however, some with whom I spoke also thought of cheating because they felt entitled to the security promised by a degree and viewed the “right” to a certain number of university seats as a form of patronage. These impressions are overgeneralizations that rely on stereotypes about young people from rural areas being less educated or less academically motivated, which reflect the biases of many urban Jordanians. Yet, I mention them nonetheless to reflect accurately the opinions of the young people with whom I spoke and also to show how educational exams expose broader social and political divides. At least among some Jordanians, cheating is viewed as one way that tribal groups blatantly reject the formalized bureaucracy that would deny them opportunities.

As the Jordanian monarchy’s power depends critically on its support by tribes, efforts to combat cheating are officially codified, yet superficial
in practice. A 2012 investigation into cheating on the tawjihi found “no wrong-doing,” and the report stated that ministry officials carried out their duties to the best of their ability. It also denied the participation of ministry officials and called on reporters to release the names of the officials who had leaked questions, thus shifting the burden of proof to civil society. According to one newspaper, the investigative committee “acknowledged that some people had used loudspeakers outside examination halls to help students cheat, but said the ministry was not responsible for preventing this and that only security forces had the authority to do so” (“Investigation,” 2012). By dividing authority through multiple branches, the government largely excuses itself from controlling cheating. Such evasive tactics suggest that the centralized government is avoiding a more direct engagement with cheating in tribal areas.

The absence of severe crackdowns and the general leniency in punishing cheating in Jordan is noteworthy. In 2015 the Jordan Teachers Association received several complaints of cheating, which were promptly and forcefully denied by the Ministry of Education. In fact, the ministry warned that such campaigns to shed light on cheating “hampered the reputation of the exam and spread confusion” (“Teacher syndicate,” 2014). Ostensibly, cheating on the tawjihi in Jordan is illegal, and students who are caught with any devices for cheating, such as mobile phones, are banned from taking the exam for two to four years. Cheating restrictions, however, are not evenly enforced across the country. In 2016 a spokesperson for the Jordan Teachers Association commented: “Education departments in some regions are known to be very rigid about the rules, while others are very lenient. Students are well aware of this and feel how unfair it is, especially for a national standard exam” (Azzeh, 2016). This quotation speaks to the extent to which even seemingly technical higher education policies reflect nuanced negotiations of power in Jordan.

Issues of academic integrity are clearly implicated in broader questions of how young people access university opportunities. Even when they justify or trivialize their actions, and the states seem willing to overlook cheating, C.W. Jones (2015) reminds us that “cheating is damaging to society, eroding norms of honesty, fair play, and reciprocity,” and, like other forms of corruption, cheating can undermine a society’s sense of trust (p. 7).

Thwarted Ambitions

Hussein Khozai, a Jordanian professor of sociology at al-Balqa Applied University, described the Jordanian exit exam as a “social exam
rather than an educational one” (Azzeh, 2013), referring to the larger socio-political significance of schooling and testing in the Arab region. Students’ perceived lack of agency over where and what they study in higher education is a major source of frustration in young people’s lives and often leads to discontent with the state that is responsible for sorting students.

One of the most striking social effects of centralized admissions is that youth regularly lament a sense of “thwarted ambition” because all but the top performers had very little say over where and what they studied. In centralized admissions systems the primary justification for the state’s role in sorting students and tracking them into educational and career paths is workforce planning, based on the premise that the government can align its higher education system to the needs of the economy. Although the guarantee of employment has long since evaporated, Arab states remain active in sorting youth by using exams. As the centralized university admissions are based on exam score, students are frequently sorted into degree programs, and subsequent career paths, for which they have no interest or aptitude.

A common refrain among young people in Syria and Jordan is that students simply cannot pursue their program of choice and that many have no choice over what they study. In 2010, I interviewed a young man from Syria, Nader, who had wanted to study accounting but did not have high enough grades. He said, “There is no taking into consideration what students desire here. Grades alone are what allow you to do what you do.” Other interviewees called choice “a luxury” or explained that they “had no future” because they were unable to study their desired major. Hassan, a twenty-one-year-old male studying English translation while also working full-time at an international company, explained: “The problem is that they don’t put the right person in the right place. If they gave me opportunity to be a computer programmer, I would be a good programmer because I love it. This is the problem: they put the wrong person in the wrong place.” Hassan’s comment is illuminating because, instead of admitting that his grades did not qualify him for his top-choice career, he clearly blamed external actors (“they”). Interviews revealed that the experience of having a thwarted educational ambition crossed lines of gender, class, and educational attainment, suggesting that it is a widespread experience for many young people and that barriers to accessing a desired university program are a real and significant source of frustration for them.

Similarly, in Morocco, even with the policy of open admissions, in reality many students are not studying their preferred concentration. A Moroccan professor whom I met in 2013 told me about a study that
his team had conducted about how students chose their majors, and the results were surprising. At the time, admissions systems were not automated, which meant that students had to stand in line to submit their application papers, and admission to various departments was first come, first served. In a strange example of perverse incentives, the study found that some students simply submitted application dossiers where lines were shortest. For example, deterred by the three-day line to enrol in law, some students simply enrolled in economics because the line was much shorter.

Families play an important role in shaping young people’s life paths. Owing to clear occupational prestige hierarchies, parents pressure students to pursue high-status professions, namely medicine and engineering, due to their social prestige and the honour such professions bring to the families. Young people’s individual aptitudes, career aspirations, or interests are frequently disregarded. As a result, many students find themselves in careers for which they are not particularly motivated.

Discontent with admissions systems across the region is exacerbated by perceptions of widespread corruption in the admissions system that privileges those with family connections. Youth from low socioeconomic family backgrounds expressed a sense of injustice resulting from the role that political and family connections had in helping students obtain access to university. One interviewee whom I interviewed in Syria remarked: “Imagine – a poor kid has to study forever to get really high grades just to get into a public school. He needs impossibly high marks. But a rich kid has two ways of succeeding. Either he can go to a private university or could find a way into a public university through his family’s connections.”

At the time of these interviews, Syria’s educational reforms were expanding opportunities to study, but it was clear that they were not necessarily decreasing the importance of wealth or connections in education. Young people’s sense of injustice undermined the state’s rationale for sorting youth: many Syrian young people felt that not only were they being sorted into majors and careers in which they were not interested, but also the sorting process itself was biased towards those who had money and connections. This perception of injustice led them to reject the state’s role in sorting youth into educational paths, and contributed to a larger sense that the state lacked the capacity to implement fair policies and, more fundamentally, was not a fair arbiter of future opportunity.

Of course, many young people did have choices: those who performed very well on their exit exam could study almost any subject they desired. Youth who said that the admissions system left them no
choice were in reality unhappy with the choices they were offered based on their lower test results. I observed that, rather than blame themselves for lack of preparation, many students blamed the broader system for presenting them with what felt like impossible options: getting exam scores that they were not able or prepared to achieve, or resigning themselves to an undesirable profession. This externalization of blame was evident in nearly all the interviews I conducted in Syria and many that I conducted in Morocco. Youth perceived the state control over sorting students into educational majors, which left youth insecure in the labour market, as the state’s inability to fulfil its obligations. This failure contributes to a delegitimization of the larger notion of state-led development, as youth feel subject to extensive state intervention, without enjoying the promised benefits.

Young men seemed more concerned about the link between education and employment than did the women to whom I spoke. In interviews conducted in Syria, young men who attended some form of higher education tended to want not only the credentials of a diploma but also the promise of labour-market security that it traditionally offers, while female respondents valued a wider range of purposes for higher education. Young men who have performed well in school expect to benefit from substantial economic returns and social prestige in the form of secure jobs in medicine or other elite fields. Their concerns with the recent neoliberal reforms focus on the loss of the prestige and economic security that accompany the introduction of new pathways to elite education and employment. Interviews that I conducted in Syria in 2009 and 2010 revealed that lower-income men who had gone on to higher education but had not achieved high marks were the most discontented with the wave of neoliberal reforms. They were tracked into programs that were often unrelated to their interests and did not provide the economic pay-off they expected. Wickham (2002) made a similar argument about Egypt: “For the Egyptian graduates who had been socialized to view themselves as a meritocratic elite, perhaps the greatest source of bitterness was what they perceived as an erosion of the link between merit and reward” (p. 159).

Similarly, in their analysis of why engineers and doctors are overrepresented among radical Islamic terrorists, Gambetta and Hertog (2017) explain that “individuals with above-average skills, who have been selected for their university studies on merit, are particularly susceptible to frustration and a sense of injustice when they find their professional future hampered by a lack of opportunities” (p. 35). This finding rings true with my own research on the sources of frustrations among Arab university students and graduates from Morocco to Syria.
Many young people did not have family connections or wealth to help them secure a better future, but they still experienced societal pressure to find gainful employment and provide for their families – without a clear path of how to do so. This burden weighed particularly on men, and many scholars argued that prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring young, unemployed men were like a tinderbox in the Middle East (Hvistendahl, 2011). My interviews revealed, however, that it is specifically the educated, unemployed men who are most discontent – not simply because they are unemployed, but also because they feel wronged. Contrary to the common assumption in many societies that unemployed men believe they have failed somehow, and internalize their shame, my findings revealed that educated unemployed young men are likely to believe that the entire higher education system, and the state in charge of it, have failed them.

In response to these thwarted ambitions, young people adopt creative strategies to navigate bureaucratic constraints. Drawing on ethnographic interviews at Yarmouk University in Jordan, Adely, Haddad, et al. (2019) identify numerous practices in which young people engage to “try to make the system work for them” (p. 81). For example, young people actively seek to change majors once they are admitted, in order to secure places in more marketable or prestigious programs. In some cases, students switch into a parallel program after being accepted. Another practice young people use is to seek supplementary credentials to make themselves more competitive in the labour market. Students and families also attempt to evade the consequences of exams by using their family connections to secure admission to a particular program or scholarship (Adely, Haddad, et al., 2019). All of these constitute forms of “resourcefulness” that young people use to retain some control over their educational trajectories (Buckner & Hodges, 2016).

“Exceptions” in Jordan

Despite the country’s exam-based admissions system, the admissions system in Jordan, unlike other countries in the region, makes no claim to being truly meritocratic. Rather, Jordanian admissions policies involve overtly political calculations (Adely et al., 2019; Reiter, 2002). Demographically, roughly 60 per cent of Jordanians today are of Palestinian origin, and the remainder are considered East Bank or Transjordanian. Admissions policies are part of a larger political balance that has shaped the Jordanian state since the 1970s: in return for the country’s tacit acceptance of a huge number of Palestinians, the Jordanian monarchy has granted a series of special privileges to East
Bank Jordanians, who tend to come from rural backgrounds, including gerrymandered voting districts and privileged access to higher education (Burke & al-Waked, 1997).

In higher education there is a historical system of makruma (plural, makarim) – which translates into “gift” or “generosity.” These makarim constitute a targeted affirmative-action program that reserves a portion of places in public universities for Jordanian young people of certain backgrounds and covers the tuition fees for some of them (Cantini, 2012; Emam, 2013). They are called gifts or royal grants from the king, but are also codified in the higher education admissions regulations, and both Cantini (2012) and Reiter (2002) have argued that they are a tool the monarchy uses to consolidate loyalty.

There are makarim designated for families of the security agencies and armed forces, employees of the Ministry of Education, and children of professors, as well as those from disadvantaged groups. While a diverse range of individuals, from Palestinians living in refugee camps to children of professors, benefit, the largest number of makarim is reserved for the children of armed forces members, accounting for about 22 per cent of all seats in university, as of 2015–16 (Adely et al., 2019). Between 2002 and 2012, roughly one-quarter to one-third of all seats were reserved for these special groups of students, although the percentage of makruma recipients at a given institution differs across the country (Malkawi, 2012).

Facing protests in 2011–12, Jordan’s Ministry of Higher Education announced changes in its scholarship programs, such that scholarships would be based on financial need rather than geography. Adely, Haddad, et al. (2019) report that in the 2015–16 academic year, 54.7 per cent of admissions occurred through open competition, while the rest were reserved through a quota system, also known as “exceptions” in Arabic. Of total admissions, 21.9 per cent were for children of armed forces members, 10.0 per cent were for students from tribal and under-developed areas of the country, 8.6 per cent were a makruma for children of teachers, 2.0 per cent were for children of university professors, 1.6 per cent were for top-performing students of their district, 1.1 per cent were a makruma for children of refugees, and 0.4 per cent were for children of martyrs and the disabled (p. 85). Both the armed forces and the tribal areas in the south that benefit from makarim overwhelmingly comprise East Bank Jordanians who are more loyal to the monarchy than those of Palestinian origin; unsurprisingly then, makarim has come to be viewed as a form of political patronage (Cantini, 2012; Reiter, 2002).

The makruma system affects who gains access to elite programs. Students admitted from disadvantaged regions are typically the
highest-performing students from their regions, but due to differences in the quality or rigour of secondary-school education across the country, the cut-off score for their admission is still much lower than in urban areas. Students in urban Amman with whom I spoke were only too happy to complain about what they perceived as unfair admissions decisions. They recounted stories of a student from an urban area who obtained a 93 per cent mark on the exit exam but was denied admission to a desired program in the competitive system, while a makruma recipient with only a 75 per cent mark might obtain admission to the same program. Adely, Haddad, et al. (2019) report similar disparities: in highly prestigious medical programs, competitive admissions may require a mark of 99 per cent, while an individual accepted through the quota system may require only 85 per cent, which many would argue is still a strong score. Differences in admissions criteria cause tensions, as some students believe that makruma recipients are admitted unfairly. It can also be difficult for makruma recipients to succeed if they are admitted to difficult programs for which they are not well prepared.

Opinions on the makruma system vary. I have spoken to university instructors and professors who have been pressured to pass makruma recipients based on their connections and backgrounds. In 2013, however, I spoke with the president of a public university who was quite supportive of the makruma system, commenting that it was designed as a way for the most-deserving students from poorer and less developed areas to obtain an education, return to their villages, and develop their regions. Similarly, in 2014, a professor of constitutional law at the University of Jordan explained to the media that the quota system worked as a form of positive discrimination, or affirmative action, because it was not reasonable to assume that a tawjihi student in Amman (the capital) and Ma’an (a less-developed region in the south) were really competing on equal terms for admission (al-Natoor, 2014).

Others, however, have argued that quota-based admissions has invoked a “constitutional controversy,” as it violates Article IV of the Constitution, which guarantees all citizens equal treatment before the law (al-Natoor, 2014). Indeed, in 2015, suggested reforms to the makruma system became hotly debated, and law-makers expressed “anger and dismay,” threatening to fire the minister of higher education when there was talk that the Higher Education Council had discussed cancelling the makruma system (Omari, 2015). In response, the minister of higher education stated that makruma exceptions to admissions were there to stay: “Exceptions in university admission criteria will not be cancelled, especially for students who live in remote areas, as the quality of education provided in these regions, and even the infrastructure in some
schools, is lower than in major cities. We have to help these students and provide them with opportunities” (Malkawi, 2015).

In short, unequal admissions decisions are justified in terms of historical inequities and national development. The effects of this unequal admissions system are complicated, but one of the most extreme effects is campus-based violence. The *Jordan Times* reported that from 2011 to 2015 there were more than 296 incidents of violence on Jordanian university campuses, involving close to 4,000 students, mostly males and mostly students enrolled in the humanities. From 2010 to 2013, on-campus fights involved 3,999 students and resulted in 31 severe, 57 moderate, and 155 minor injuries, in addition to property damage (Malkawi, 2016). The consequences of violence can be severe: students can be expelled, universities closed, and classes cancelled after gangs of angry students fight one another, often breaking windows and chairs or burning tires. For example, in December 2016, the *Jordan Times* reported that seventeen students were expelled or suspended from the University of Jordan after a brawl of two hundred students broke out in November. In another example, in 2013 at Mutah University, located outside of Karak, hundreds of students were involved in a brawl related to student council elections: one police car was set on fire, and a twenty-one-year-old bystander died of a heart attack while trying to flee.

Causes of campus violence are multifaceted; tribal honour, often relating to female conduct, is considered a primary cause. Fights frequently break out if females from one tribe are accused of dating males from another tribe. In March 2012 a fight broke out at the University of Jordan when a male student saw a female relative talking to men from another tribe and fired several blanks from a firearm. In 2013, while living in Jordan, I interviewed a number of young Jordanians about violence on campuses. Mohammed, a young man who had studied at the University of Jordan, told me, “The reason for 95 per cent of fights on campuses is girls.” He explained that if a girl from one tribe or extended family network (*asheera*) was seen talking to a boy from another tribe, the boys from her extended tribal family might start a fight with her male direct relatives because many of the male students felt it was important to defend their female relative’s honour. Although the percentage of students involved in campus violence is small, it is associated with students coming from areas with strong tribal affiliations where defending honour is viewed as an important aspect of one’s identity. Hussein Khuzaay, a professor of sociology at the University of Jordan, explained in the *Jordan Times* that part of the blame lay in “the tribal society that fosters violent and vengeful tendencies” and that views men as “manly and heroic” when they engage in violent defence
of another tribe member (Al Harahsheh, 2017). Although the culture of defending the honour of distant relatives is changing, and many young educated urban Jordanians are increasingly permissive of male-female interactions between non-relatives, violence remains a major concern on many campuses.

Although gender relations and socially constructed conceptions of respect may be the primary cause of campus violence, makruma admissions policies are also recognized as a contributing factor. Critics state that those who engage in campus violence have been overwhelmingly accepted through the makruma system (Omari, 2015). My own interviewees also seemed to believe that makruma recipients were more likely to engage in fights over female honour for cultural reasons. In addition, makruma recipients accepted into programs that are too difficult for them often skip class and loiter on campuses.

At the institutional level a number of universities, including the Jordan University of Science and Technology and the University of Jordan, have sought to limit campus violence through strict policies. The universities have increased sanctions against violence: students are now expelled for engaging in violence, and, as of 2017, these penalties were finally being implemented to full effect, with seventeen students being expelled from the University of Jordan because of violence. The university has also instituted other reforms such as requiring identification to enter campus, installing security cameras, and training campus security in how to control fights.

In 2013, the Higher Education Commission, Jordan’s regulating higher education body, decided that “students expelled as a result of violence [would] not be accepted into any other public or private university” (“Classes halted,” 2013). In response to the events in Mutah in 2013, described earlier, the commission held an emergency meeting and took a strong stance, reiterating that those involved in such actions must be expelled and prevented from re-enrolling at other universities in the country. However, the policy was not initially implemented in areas with strong tribal influences. For example, some of the students who had engaged in violence at Mutah University and been expelled were later re-admitted owing to “external pressures” – a euphemism for political pressures from leaders. Misleh Tarawneh, the former dean of student affairs at the university, resigned from his post in protest against the decision to allow these students to return.

The issue has remained in news headlines in Jordan. In 2016, at a meeting with public university presidents, King Abdullah strongly denounced campus violence, and universities discussed the many efforts they had taken to reduce it. In 2018, the Lower House in Jordan passed
a law to allow university security guards to have the status of law enforcement officers, thereby giving them greater authority to combat violence. It remains to be seen how admissions policies will be revised; to date, tribal power and connections seem to have undermined existing policies. Ultimately the national government can issue strict policies, but the power to admit, punish, and expel students remains in the hands of local university administrators who must navigate between stated national policies and local communities exerting their own cultural and political pressures.

**Privatizing Pathways**

Seeking to expand access while leaving exit exams intact, many Arab nations have created programs that allow students to enrol in higher education through alternative access channels. Egypt, Jordan, and Syria all instituted “dual-track” admissions. These programs, typically called parallel programs (*al-mawazi*, Arabic), accept students who did not gain admission to subsidized seats through regular competitive systems, in return for substantially higher fees (Adely et al., 2019). Specific policies differ somewhat by country: in Egypt, high-fee programs take place in different classrooms; in Syria two programs were opened, one called Parallel and one called Open Learning, in which students study on weekends; and in Jordan students are enrolled in identical programs and sit beside their higher-achieving peers. Cantini (2012) reports that the parallel system, which was introduced in Jordan in 2002, was intended to be an evening program, only permitting students to take classes after five o’clock. It was assumed that this internal differentiation would limit protest over the ability of students in the parallel system to gain admission by paying more. However, in as early as 2003, students in the parallel program have been integrated into regular classes. Cantini (2012) reported that during his fieldwork at the University of Jordan in 2003–5, students could be admitted into the parallel system with only 65 per cent of the score needed to gain admission to the competitive seat. Since then, competition for both the funded, competitive seats and the seats in the parallel program has increased significantly.

Parallel programs serve dual purposes: they expand access to students who might not have gained admission otherwise, and generate income for the university. Since the 1990s, the deepening of a neoliberal economic agenda and rising student enrolments across the Arab states have resulted in reduced per-student state funding for higher education. In the 1990s, public universities in Egypt established fee-paying programs that were taught in English (Bollag, 1996). Starting in 2006,
the Egyptian government allowed public universities to charge small fees that allowed students with lower exit exam scores to enrol in the faculties of Law, Commerce, and Arts (Fahim & Sami, 2011). In Jordan, the parallel program has been essential to the generation of revenue for public universities. Cantini (2012) reported, based on fieldwork in 2003–5, that students in a parallel program paid roughly seven times the tuition fees paid by students in a competitive seat. Since that time, however, fees in both the competitive and the parallel programs have increased substantially, resulting in a narrower gap. Badran and Badran (2018) found that in Jordan the average fees across subsidized programs in public universities were USD 1,217, compared to USD 3,954 in the parallel programs, or slightly more than three times the subsidized fee.

Parallel programs, where they have been enacted, have had a significant impact on enrolments. Huge numbers of students have been rapidly incorporated into their national higher education systems, including many who would not have been able to attend otherwise. When I lived in Syria in 2009 and 2010, the parallel program accounted for about 50,000 students, compared to the competitive programs in public universities, which constituted 288,000 students, or about 15 per cent of all students. Another third was also enrolled in evening and weekend courses in Open Learning programs (Buckner, 2013).

At the same time, in interviews I conducted in Syria and Jordan with young people, parallel programs generated real concern. Some believed that parallel programs, by allowing new and less qualified entrants into higher education, were weakening the power of a university credential in the labour market. Similarly, scholars have raised concerns about declining quality due to overcrowding (Massadeh, 2012). Others believed that the programs were simply money-making schemes by governments that had forsaken their promises of free higher education (Buckner, 2013). Cantini (2012) reported that those students who gained admission to the competitive seats “more overtly denounce[d] this trend” towards a privatized access channel. More recently, Adely et al. (2019) reported that the fees of the parallel programs in Jordan were scheduled to increase by up to 180 per cent. Students have protested such increases, and students and scholars alike have argued that these programs represent a de facto privatization of higher education that is unaffordable to many (Massadeh, 2012).

Not all countries in the region, however, use standardized exams to sort students into majors, reflecting different relationships between the state and its young citizens. Two other models are used. First, there is the broad access model of the Arab Gulf states, where all national secondary-school graduates can enrol in a higher education program of
their choice. In the Arab Gulf states, including the UAE and Qatar, there is very little desire or attempt to weed out all but the best and brightest. Rather, admissions systems provide substantial support to facilitate admission and allow students to select their own concentrations. A second model is found in Lebanon, where access is determined at the institutional level in a predominantly private system, reflecting the fragmented nature of state power. In both models, exams are less consequential than they are elsewhere. In distinct ways, however, the higher education admissions in these countries are linked to their own states’ legitimacy, and each state is struggling with reforms to its systems.

Higher Education in the Arab Gulf States

The social contract in the Arab Gulf states is fundamentally different from that in the Levant and North Africa, due to their national wealth from natural resources. The nation-building period of the Arab Gulf states coincided with the discovery of oil and an influx of huge numbers of foreigners, which made the latter simultaneously economically wealthy and an ethnic minority group in their new homeland. The social contract of the Arab Gulf states reflects this unique set of circumstances and is built on the premise of shared wealth and mutual benefit: in return for the granting of authority and political legitimacy to select tribal families, all citizens would benefit from the nation’s oil wealth. Fyfe (1989) wrote, “It is not an exaggeration to say that sharing out the oil wealth lies at the heart of the conceptual legitimacy of the Gulf sheikhs” (p. 11). In the post-independence era, citizens of the Arab Gulf states were guaranteed, and now have come to expect, a wide range of social services including free health care, free education, subsidized housing, subsidized utilities, and preferential employment opportunities.

This conception of a strong state committed to significant provision of social services has shaped higher education admissions. At the most basic level it has created two separate higher education systems: free public systems for national citizens and sprawling, tuition-dependent private systems, primarily for non-nationals.

Within the public system the foundational logic is not meritocracy but capacity building. Admission to higher education in the Gulf states rests on the assumption that all those who are willing and able to attend higher education should be able to attend at no cost. Unlike in North Africa, where free access is permitted only to those who pass a rigorous exit exam, in the Arab Gulf states passing coursework is sufficient for secondary-school graduation. For admission to higher education,
students are required to sit for English- and mathematics-proficiency assessments, and those who score above a minimum threshold are granted admission to university. Starting in 2016, the government of the UAE introduced a standardized computer-based test for all students in grade twelve, known as the Emirates Standardized Test (EmSAT), which covers Arabic, English, mathematics, and physics, and scores on this test have become the basis for admissions to public universities.

One of the defining features of higher education in both the UAE and Qatar is that English is the medium of instruction in most programs, a policy choice that signals a commitment to modernization and development through integration into the global economy. This choice of a primarily English-language system has had a profound effect on admission to higher education: students must demonstrate English proficiency. As Arabic is the medium of instruction throughout secondary school, academic English proficiency constitutes a major barrier to access.

Prior to 2004, all students in the UAE went through the Foundation Program of Intensive English, known informally as the Foundation program, which served as an academic bridge by providing intensive English preparation for university. Foundation program teachers would determine when a student was capable of pursuing university, based on in-class work. This program was free to Emiratis, and in the past they could study more or less indefinitely in these programs until they passed. Many students did study for two years or more.

The Foundation program was costly, however; at one point it was estimated to take up one-third of the higher education budget (Pennington, 2017). In 2004 the Ministry of Higher Education began allowing students to take an English-proficiency assessment that would exempt them from the Foundation program and permit direct entry to federal universities. Students who did not receive a high enough score to enter university directly could continue in the Foundation program, later called an Academic Bridge program (ABP). These students and their families then had to pay to sit again for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam to prove proficiency.

In 2004 the minimum standard for direct entry was initially a score of 5.0 on the IELTS, although this has since been increased to 5.5. It is worth noting that a score of 5.0 on IELTS is well below the English-proficiency level required in the vast majority of American, Canadian, British, and Australian universities, and there is legitimate debate over whether it is really a sufficient standard for university study. That said, in 2004 only 3 per cent of Emiratis qualified for direct entry to federal institutions (Salem & Swan, 2014). In 2010 the percentage qualifying had increased to roughly 10 per cent (Moussly, 2010), and by 2014 it
was 20 per cent (Pennington, 2017). While the ministry focuses on the fact that more Emiratis are gaining direct entry to university every year due to improvements in the secondary-school curriculum, the reality is that as of 2017 more than 75 per cent of secondary-school graduates in the UAE were not prepared to enrol directly in the English-language higher education programs of public universities.

In 2013, reforms were proposed to eliminate the Foundation program by 2018, citing costs to both the government and families (Salem & Swan, 2014). Starting in the 2019–20 academic year, the existing Foundation program at the Higher Colleges of Technology was phased out, and English-language support was added to General Studies courses. However, ABPs still exist at Zayed University and UAE University, and students are permitted to be “pre-admitted” to university with an Em-SAT English score of 1100, compared to the 1250 required for direct entry. According to data from Zayed University, more than a thousand students each year are enrolled in the ABP, and completion rates over the past decade are roughly 75 per cent for women and 50 per cent for men (UAE Open Data Portal, 2021).

The phasing out of the Academic Bridge altogether was pushed back because the ministry recognized that most Emirati students were not ready to enter an English-speaking university program directly out of secondary school. Notably, the country’s capacity-building model has never proposed that students pay for the program, and students do not suffer severe consequences for a lack of preparation – reflecting the vision of state-led development in the region, where social services are provided by the government at no cost. More sympathetically, it acknowledges the reality that Emirati students should not have to bear the consequences of fragmented language-education policies that simply do not provide them the option of pursuing higher education in their native language.

Language competency also lies at the heart of shifting admissions policies in Qatar. Between 2003 and 2006 the RAND Corporation came to Qatar to revolutionize and modernize its educational system, including major governance reforms at Qatar University, the large national university. Programs were internationally accredited, and the university began to teach in English. As part of the reforms, they recruited faculty and staff from abroad and supported research by creating new graduate degrees. For students, they raised the level of English proficiency required for admission.

One of my interviewees in Qatar explained that this put many Qatari students and families in the difficult position of not having the English language abilities to pursue university. He explained: “Many Qatari families were like: our kids are citizens of this state, and they cannot
meet the admission requirements of the branch campuses, and now they cannot meet language requirements of Qatar University. At the time, there was a group of families who saw no options for their children.” In 2011 the reforms were significantly rolled back, and the university resumed teaching in Arabic, leaving many foreign professors unsure of their futures. One interviewee stated very simply that the reversal in policy was a “political decision.” Another professor in Qatar said, “It is my understanding that this announcement was made overnight. The president of Qatar University apparently didn’t know about the change until he read about it in the newspaper.” In both the UAE and Qatar, governments are not trying to limit enrolments to higher education, but language remains a fundamental issue, and admissions policies flip between a desire to raise standards in the name of quality and and a desire to lower them to match students’ actual levels of proficiency.

Findlow (2006) has noted that the adoption of English for most subjects has created a “linguistic dualism” that perpetuates a prestige hierarchy. In an ethnographic study in the UAE she argues that Arabic is associated with “cultural authenticity,” including religion, traditions, and a focus on the local community. In contrast, English is associated with ideas of modernity, global outlook, business, material status, and secularism (p. 25). These ideas map onto and perpetuate institutional hierarchies. The students she interviewed thought that studying medicine and engineering at a national university had the highest prestige, followed by technological and business programs, which were considered “entrepreneurial,”; education, law, and Islamic law, all of which are taught in Arabic, were thought to be the lowest-prestige programs.

**Paying for Access in Lebanon’s Privatized System**

Lebanon and Palestine are the only two states in the region where students apply for admission directly to universities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, higher education in Lebanon has a large and dynamic private sector: there is one large public university – the LU – and dozens of smaller private universities, including older prestigious institutions such as the American University of Beirut and the University of Saint-Joseph, as well as many other more vocationally oriented institutions founded after the end of the civil war in 1990.

In Lebanon, like other countries in the region, students are sorted into tracks in secondary school based on the results of a primary-school leaving exam, focusing on a science and mathematics stream, an arts and literature stream, or a technical and vocational stream. Unlike other countries in the region, which use Arabic as the language of instruction
in public schooling, throughout Lebanon secondary school is taught in either French or English. At the end of secondary school, students in the literary and scientific tracks sit for a final exam known as the Lebanese Baccalaureate (Baccalaureat Libanais). If students pass the Bac, they are permitted to enrol in any university that will accept them. Students in the technical and vocational stream sit for the Technical Baccalaureate and are able to enrol in various post-secondary programs. The final year of secondary school in Lebanon is considered the academic equivalent of the first year of an American or Canadian college or university, and so bachelor’s degree programs are only three years long.

Unlike the centralized systems in much of the region, in Lebanon students typically apply to a certain program within a university. Admission is based on passing a subject-matter exam or general language exam. For example, admission to the LU requires both a Lebanese Baccalaureate and passing grades on four faculty-administered tests: Arabic, English and/or French, economics, and mathematics. This means that, while students in Lebanon have much more say than others over where and what they study, their options are still constrained by decisions made in their early years, mainly their secondary-school track and whether they studied in English or French at the secondary level.

Additionally, the options of students in Lebanon are highly constrained by their finances. When I asked one Lebanese university graduate how he chose his university, he stated simply, “Well, first off, I knew my budget.” Administrators and professors confirmed that financial considerations are one of the primary factors determining students’ access in Lebanon. As the system is highly privatized and few universities offer financial aid or scholarship programs, families’ options are constrained by how much they can afford, although some university programs are flexible and allow students to work and study at the same time.

This market-based model, in which admissions decisions are made by institutions rather than a centralized agency, reflects the reality of Lebanon’s weak state. It also means that Lebanese youth are less likely to direct blame for thwarted aspirations at the state than are youth in other countries. Reema, a young Lebanese woman who had studied media at the LU and subsequently found employment in teaching Arabic at a private centre, told me that if she could go back in time, she likely would have chosen to study a different subject. Rather than directing anger at the government, she placed most responsibility on the individual student to figure out what degrees were in demand, stating that “the student, here, has to think about what is demanded.”

Essentially, in Lebanon, the absence of a strong government means that there is no clear target for anger or frustration: instead, there seems
to be large-scale resignation. Lebanon’s market-based admissions process reflects the lack of control that the Lebanese state has over the lives of its citizens. The state stakes no claim to the right to sort youth into future paths. What is striking about this absence of control over admissions in Lebanon is that it seems to signify a broken state rather than a strong commitment to market provision. There is certainly widespread frustration at the ineptitude of the state, but this is not targeted towards a specific person or regime. Reema explained: “Of course, people are frustrated at the government – there is no water, there is no electricity, because of the corruption of the state. We say the whole country is corrupt, politically. And yet, there are no protests. Here, people know nothing will change. Nothing will change. If you see, for example, someone unqualified get a job, you say, ‘What can we do? This is Lebanon.’ There is no solution. Your only solutions are, you can travel or you can shut up. There is no other solution.”

This lack of faith carries over into the education system more broadly: the public primary and secondary education system enrols less than three in ten students because many families choose to pay costly tuitions to send their children to private schools instead. The privatized nature of higher education seems to reflect a divided state that cannot serve as a model of reform for other countries in the region.

**Higher Education Admissions and State Legitimacy**

Mazawi (2005) has argued that higher education in the Arab world is concerned with the “distribution of sociopolitical power” (p. 68). This chapter has detailed how admissions systems are a policy tool for the state to distribute power, and specifically that they have become institutionalized into broader social contracts, making them difficult to reform. In contrast to technical reforms that suggest creating better tests or devolving admissions decisions to university personnel, I argue that a preferable starting point for reforming admissions systems in the Arab world is to understand the deep and powerful constellations of interests and values that uphold the current systems. Each country’s admissions system reflects the underlying logic of the state. In countries relying on high-stakes exit exams, the logic is meritocracy. Through its end-of-year exams, the public education system is imbued with the authority to assess students’ knowledge and abilities and then sort the students into different life paths. Standardized exit exams largely determine who attends university, what programs they study, how much they pay, and what careers they can eventually enter, and therefore a good performance on tests is a highly legitimate way of securing the state’s bounties for oneself and one’s family.
Nonetheless, the legitimacy of exams rests on the perceptions that the state’s educational bureaucracy is both effective and egalitarian. In reality, the logic of meritocracy is deeply undermined by inequality, privatization, and corruption. Wealthy families maintain access to a disproportionate number of seats in university because of their children’s higher-quality secondary education and private tutoring. Within these systems, cheating or relying on connections to secure seats are among the ways in which youth are contesting the putative meritocracy of the state and thereby purchasing “better futures” (Cohen, 2004); this allows them to reclaim a sense of control in the face of the formalized and centralized authority of the state.

In countries where admissions systems are not based exclusively on exit exams, they reflect the role of the state in young people’s lives. In Jordan, preferential treatment for East Bank Jordanians and loyal tribes is a form of political patronage. In the Arab Gulf states, the logic of capacity building for national citizens makes it difficult to ever justify not investing in supporting students in higher education. In contrast, Lebanon represents a distinct case where privatized admissions permit religious- and class-based sorting, and lack state control.

Despite institutionalized differences in admissions systems, the similarities across the region are noteworthy. First, it is clear that higher education admissions policies are not simply a technical or bureaucratic issue; admission to higher education is highly political and, frequently, politicized. Admissions policies reflect how the state grants, or does not grant, social status to various groups and how young people and their families are navigating these systems to secure opportunities for their future. Additionally, as macroeconomic conditions change, young people are left to navigate increasingly insecure pathways from formal education to the labour market (Shirazi, 2020). This means that the differential resources that young people have with which to navigate increasingly insecure pathways have become even more important. A growing body of research shows that the wealthy and well-connected are most likely to benefit from private tutoring, fee-paying parallel programs, private universities, and opportunities for foreign study. Many of these new privatized options for university also map onto the language of instruction; Hanafi and Arvanitis (2014) explain that in the Arab world, where foreign-language proficiency is used to connote cultural capital, language has become a “selection tool in the higher education system” (p. 728). Given the extent to which higher education admissions systems are woven into Arab societies, a better starting point for reforming admissions systems in the Arab world would be to recognize them as arenas of status competition that serve to maintain a highly unequal status quo.