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Do the Right Thing: American and Chinese Higher Education Interests in the Middle East [1]

A couple of months ago, I spoke to Dov Zakheim about the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS). Zakheim is a longtime foreign policy hand, who served as Under Secretary of Defense during the George W. Bush administration. He has also been a trustee of the American-modeled independent university in the Kurdish region of Iraq for the past decade. I wanted to ask him how more than 100 students from the American University of Afghanistan wound up at AUIS.

“This isn't just about a university,” he was quick to clarify. “It's about American soft power at a time when the Chinese are trying to invest heavily in the region. Just today the news broke that they are brokering a deal with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Anything that makes us look good is important. That is an example of something that the Chinese can’t or won’t do.”

American universities abroad earn much of their local legitimacy from their disinterestedness–their raison d'être is education, not geopolitics. These institutions can–and should–receive funding from U.S. government sources but must maintain credible independence.

Zakheim’s concern is well founded. In recent years, China has emerged as the Middle East’s largest foreign investor and has made soft power a pillar of its foreign policy. Meanwhile, numerous developments–from the economic pivot to Asia to the military withdrawal from Afghanistan–have sowed doubts throughout the region about America’s commitment and reliability.

But does that mean American influence is on the wane? Not necessarily.

The United States still maintains a sizable advantage where hearts and minds are cultivated. The basic idea is that studying in a foreign country endears individuals to their host nations well after they return home. Analysts therefore regard the number of foreign students enrolled in a nation’s universities as an important indicator of soft power. For decades, America has hosted more international students than any other nation.

But there are worrying trends. According to the Institute of International Education’s *Open Doors* data, the number of students from the Middle East and North Africa declined by over 50 percent between 2016 and 2022. Pundits point to the Trump administration’s Muslim travel

ban and unwelcoming rhetoric as contributors to the decline. Yet the slide has continued through the Biden administration.

Fortunately for American policymakers, there are other soft power resources when it comes to international education. According to the Global American Higher Education (GAHE) database, there are more than 50 degree-granting American higher education institutions in the Middle East. In each of them, students can get an in-person American education without stepping foot in the United States. GAHE data includes enrollment estimates for 38 of these institutions. They cumulatively enroll over 165,000 students–more than three times the number of Middle Eastern students in the United States and potentially 10 times the amount studying in China. Any consideration of America's soft power resources in international education is woefully inadequate without inclusion of these institutions.

China has also been using higher education to promote its soft power in the Middle East, but its strategy differs in a couple of crucial ways. Rather than exporting its own institutions and degree-granting programs, China has emphasized partnerships with existing universities, principally through Confucius Institutes. Scrutiny of the quasi-governmental Chinese language and culture centers has led to mass closures in the United States, Australia and the European Union. But they are received rather uncritically in the Middle East, where approximately 15 Confucius Institutes continue to operate.

Another difference between the two nations' approaches to higher education abroad concerns curricular content. Chinese university partnerships with Middle Eastern institutions promote STEM programs consistent with its Belt and Road infrastructure initiative. American higher education initiatives abroad seek to advance democracy, free speech and human rights via liberal arts programming. This difference–the transformational versus the transactional–reflects the divergent priorities and values of the two countries.

As competition between the United States and China intensifies will universities become mere pawns in a global chess match?

Yes and no. The notion that a university can be a point scorer in a geopolitical rivalry is not new. During the Cold War, Americans and Soviets battled for influence in the lecture halls of nonaligned countries. But the Department of State cannot direct the actions of American universities overseas. Their goals may align at times. But any overlap must be incidental. AUIS leaders provided refuge to Afghans before even knowing how they would pay for it. The State Department eventually provided financial assistance. But Zakheim and AUIS were not doing the U.S. government's bidding. University leadership decided to accommodate so many displaced students out of a humanitarian imperative–because it was, in the words of AUIS president Bruce Ferguson, simply "the right thing to do."

American universities abroad earn much of their local legitimacy from their disinterestedness–their raison d'être is education, not geopolitics. These institutions can–and should–receive funding from U.S. government sources but must maintain credible independence. This is a difficult needle to thread. Proper institutional governance is therefore indispensable to ensure sufficient autonomy. AUIS has an independent board of trustees composed of accomplished and influential individuals from the United States, Iraq and the wider Middle East. Diversity helps to allay concerns about partisanship.

American higher education institutions have a 160-year foothold in the Middle East. The

first–Robert College–was established in Istanbul in 1863. Since then, other great powers–Ottoman, French, British–have also held sway in the region. The recent introduction of another does not necessarily spell doom for the United States. Indeed, much of the world is perfectly happy for American and Chinese soft power to coexist rather than compete.

American policymakers should welcome the contrast. Chinese higher education can tout its ascendant scientific prowess and technical expertise throughout the Middle East. But in the long run, an American liberal arts education is more likely to provide the transformative experience the youth of the region seek. Besides, a long tradition of institutional disinterestedness can help to insulate American higher education institutions from occasional and inevitable geopolitical flare-ups. The same cannot be said for Chinese efforts. American institutions' independence from government control enables them to innovate and take bold action–to do the right thing.
