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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Promoting an academic culture in the Arab world: correspondence

Sir,

I enjoyed reading the article by Khaled Moustafa, presenting an approach to provide a transparent picture of the current scientific and academic environment in the Arab world. It articulated proposed causes and solutions to the complicated matter of academic integrity.[1] From a 10,000-foot view, this problem in the Arab world seems to be very common across many different departments, agencies, and countries not only in the developing world but to some extent in the developed world as well. It appears to stem from and correlate with the level of corruption, and that is why it is more pronounced in some countries than others. The author cited many poor ethical standard indicators in the Arab world, including "Wasta," intellectual theft, influencing the ranking agencies, suboptimal R and D expenditures, importing the Western knowledge passively without active tailored application to the country's local issues, and lastly, high illiteracy rates. I agree with the issues cited in the article, and I am trying—in this correspondence—to shed additional light on this issue and its proposed solution.

It is terrific that the Gulf countries have achieved a great openness to international universities and businesses, yet, one of the common practices in these countries is that highly sensitive and leadership positions are granted exclusively to their citizens even if they are noticeably less qualified than other noncitizen residents in the country. Unfortunately, despite the open-arms policies, this discrimination based on the nation of origin in the more developed Arabic countries is still considered a substantial obstacle toward development.

Reform and change do not occur overnight. Improvement occurs as a result of a steady long-term cumulative effort of individuals who provide ongoing transformations in their environment little by little, which can influence the culture, change attitudes, and perspectives, leading to an individual and society paradigm shift. This paradigm shift starts from the inside of an individual out to influence his or her circle of connections in the household, social network, and the workplace.

The West with its capitalism predominance has realized the need and value of investing in the human self-development to achieve long-term success on individual and corporate levels. Personal and professional development workshops and books that focus on high morals and principles in the family, workplace, colleges, and corporations may have a vital role in promoting high standards and nurturing a culture for excellence. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie is one of the best books in self-development and emotional intelligence. It focuses on reinforcing certain principles, attitudes, perspectives, techniques, and strategies with detailed elaboration and success stories to replace negative behaviors with positive habits. To show a glimpse of this book to the reader, I have picked three elements of several techniques and strategies listed under each main category in the book as listed in Table 1.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey is another excellent book in self-development. It focuses on adopting high moral principles and avoiding "deceiving" strategies for individuals to be equipped in navigating their life journey to achieve success and positively impact other people's lives.

On the society level, studies showed that corruption levels and gross domestic product (GDP) for the countries are negatively correlated (i.e., a higher level of corruption leads to lower GDP), and one of the studies showed an average of 6–10 years lag between the corruption level change and the subsequent GDP (positive or negative) change.[2] There are several anti-corruption frameworks proposed to promote high work ethics and morals and at the same time, enforce laws and policies to penalize for fraud, bribery, and immorality which are beyond the scope of this paper.

In academia, and more specifically in the medical field, various frameworks are proposed at medical schools and at physicians' levels to promote different competencies including research. For example, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in Canada endorse the CanMEDS framework for physicians and medical experts. The expected skills, competencies, and central roles include being a communicator, collaborator, leader, health advocate, scholar, and professional.[3]

A controversy about whether the reform should start from the top of the pyramid (within the government, ministries, and top leadership agencies) down to the lower level of the pyramid or the other way around (i.e., from the bottom

Table 1: Sample of principles and techniques from Carnegie's book

Fundamental techniques in handling people
Do not criticize.
Give honest and sincere appreciation.
Arouse in the other person an eager want.
Habits and behaviors to make people like you
Smile.
Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.
Make the other person feel important (and do it sincerely).
Habits and behaviors win people to your way of thinking
The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it.
Try honestly to see things from the other person's point of view.
Appeal to the nobler motives.
Be a leader
Begin with praise and honest appreciation.
Talk about your own mistakes before criticizing the other person.
Ask questions instead of giving direct orders.

Table 2: Sample of principles deeply rooted in the people's conscience in the Arab world

"Love for your brother what you love for yourself."
"Part of the perfection of one's faith is leaving that which does not concern him."
"No one should be reprimanded for the mistake of others."
"Your smile in the face of your brother is an act of kindness."
"Whosoever does an atom's worth of good will see it, and whosoever does an atom's worth of evil will see it."
"Leave arguments even if you are right, abandon lies even when you are joking."
"Say kind words or keep silent."

up) is observed. The government and corporates can issue new laws and policies against bribery, which could limit it publicly (but not necessarily behind the scene); however, promoting individual's aversion toward bribery based on the fact that it violates the basic principle of justice could be a more powerful tool to eliminate it. The change in society hardly happens unless the individuals change their perspectives and culture with a new paradigm shift.

The aforementioned frameworks are developed and tested in foreign countries, and they may face some challenges when they are applied in the Arab world. Therefore, they must be tweaked to be aligned with the need, perception, perspective, and culture of the people and countries that they are applied in. Our history has a rich scientific and ethical heritage and success stories that relate well to the people in the Arab world, which could be used as a way to promote high morals and ethics.

On an individual level, Table 2 include very few highlights of numerous principles and behaviors, which have been deeply rooted in the conscious of millions of people in the Arab world and they reason with them very well. Living up to these principles and habits genuinely by individuals could achieve healthy relationships in the greater society.

On a society level, the phenomenal legendary humanity achievement during the reign of Caliph Omar Bin Abdul-Aziz is an extraordinary historical success. Under his wise reform and management to "Baitulmal" (national treasury), the result was prosperity to the whole society where everyone has social security and abundant welfare, to the point it was almost too hard to find people who are in need of charity. With his sweeping reform, he was able to observe magnificent results within less than 30 months in power. Based on a recent paper [4] provided socioeconomic analysis for his period, six critical success factors were cited: (1) establishing a healthy climate for economic growth, (2) strengthening of treasury funds, (3) stimulating and boosting the business sector, (4) creating new regulations for the agriculture sector to support farmers and land utilization, (5) better utilization of stored general fund in the treasury, and (6) using the national treasury vigilantly. This great success story highlighted a reform that started at the top of the hierarchy down to the base and influenced the whole society.

In conclusion, an effective reform should start at the top and at the bottom of the hierarchy pyramid to elevate individuals and improve governments simultaneously. Our heritage is rich in self-development, emotional intelligence, and government policy change. The key is the genuine interests in adhering to the high moral principles.

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