

Marriotts Ridge High School Model United Nations Conference – UNESCO General Assembly

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization General Assembly on equal access to education worldwide! Throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), educational disparity is a preeminent issue. The majority of children lack the necessary resources to pursue any form of education. Whether this is caused by cultural norms, militant groups, or a lack of resources, the extent to which children and adolescents can take advantage of educational institutions to further pursue knowledge has been limited. In this committee, you will be tasked to come up with a peaceful resolution that addresses education deficiencies across the Middle East and North Africa. We look forward to seeing how you strategize and collaborate to arrive at a peaceful resolution. The fate of MENA is in your hands.

Hello Delegates! My name is Suhas Chokkaku and I am a Senior at Marriotts Ridge High School. I will be your Chair for this General Assembly. I joined MRHS Model UN in my freshman year during quarantine, and it was very interesting to see how Model UN operated in a virtual environment. Being in Model UN taught me how to become a better argumentative speaker and allowed me to meet people with a similar passion for spirited debate. We are very excited for you all to partake in this committee and to be your co-chairs!

Hi Delegates! My name is Archana Ponnada and I am a senior at Marriotts Ridge High School. I will be your Co-Chair for this General Assembly. I joined Model UN as a sophomore as a means of improving my public speaking skills. Model UN has been a great way for me to explore my interest in international relations, boost my confidence, and meet new people! In the past, I have attended NAIMUN along with several local conferences as a delegate. I am ecstatic to see the direction in which you guys will drive this committee.

If you have any questions or concerns about the Equal Access to Education GA or RidgeMUNC, feel free to email Marriotts Ridge's MUN at mrhsmun@gmail.com or either of the chairs at suhas.chokkaku@gmail.com or aponnada06@gmail.com

Kind Regards,

Suhas Chokkaku, *Chair*

Archana Ponnada, *Co-Chair*

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Introduction to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization(UNESCO)



The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized agency within the United Nations, dedicated to promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in the areas of education, arts, sciences, and culture. UNESCO was founded in 1945 as the successor to the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, and its constitution sets the agency's goals,

structure, and operating framework. The organization's original mission, shaped by World War II, is to advance peace, sustainable development, and human rights through fostering collaboration and dialogue among nations. To achieve this, UNESCO focuses on five main program areas: education, natural sciences, social sciences, culture, and communication.

UNESCO supports projects that enhance literacy, provide technical education and assistance, advance science, protect media independence and freedom of the press, preserve cultural and regional history, and promote cultural diversity. Over the years, UNESCO has expanded its activities as a hub for world culture and science. It supports the translation and dissemination of world literature, helps preserve cultural and natural World Heritage Sites, works to bridge the digital divide, and creates inclusive knowledge societies through information and communication.

UNESCO is governed by the General Conference, composed of member states and associate members, which meets every two years to set the agency's programs and budget. It also elects members of the executive board, which manages UNESCO's work, and appoints a Director-General every four years to serve as the agency's chief administrator. As a member of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, UNESCO works with other UN agencies and organizations to fulfill the Sustainable Development Goals.

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The origins of UNESCO's mandate for international cooperation can be found in a 1921 resolution by the League of Nations to establish a commission to study the sharing of cultural, educational, and scientific achievements between nations. The resulting International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) was created in 1922 and consisted of prominent figures such as Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, and Henri Bergson. In 1924, the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) was established in Paris to act as the executing agency for ICIC. However, the outbreak of World War II disrupted the work of these organizations. The International Bureau of Education (IBE) has been working as a non-governmental organization in the field of international education development since December 1925 and joined UNESCO in 1952 after establishing a joint commission.

After the signing of the Atlantic Charter in 1941 and the establishment of the United Nations, the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education began meetings in London which ultimately led to the creation of UNESCO. In 1943, the need for an international organization was expressed in the Moscow Declaration, signed by several countries across the world, and further developed through the Dumbarton Oaks Conference proposals in 1944. In 1945, a UN conference was held in London to establish an educational and cultural organization and was attended by representatives of 44 governments. The Constitution of UNESCO was signed by 37 countries and the first General Conference took place in 1946, where Dr. Julian Huxley was elected as the Director-General. The Constitution was amended in 1954, which changed the governance structure so that members of the executive board would represent their respective governments. Over time, political and historical factors have shaped UNESCO's activities and operations, including the Cold War and the decolonization of the USSR.

UNESCO has made significant contributions in fields such as education and culture. For example, the organization has been active in the fight against racism, issuing influential statements on the subject starting in 1950 and concluding with the 1978 Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice. In the field of education, UNESCO has been involved in pilot projects on fundamental education, promoting universal primary education, and leading global initiatives such as the



World Conference on Education for All. In culture, UNESCO has launched campaigns to save

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monuments of cultural significance, such as the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia in 1960, which relocated 22 monuments to prevent their destruction. The organization's work on cultural heritage led to the adoption of the Convention in 1972 which was about the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

UNESCO has official relations with 322 international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are organizations independent of government involvement that are organized on a local, national, or international level to address issues in support of the public good. Most of these relations that UNESCO has are “operational” and a few are “formal”. However, the highest affiliated credential that an international NGO can have to UNESCO is “formal associate” and the 22 NGOs with “formal associate” relations to UNESCO are listed below. Please utilize them as sources as you do your research.

- ❖ [International Baccalaureate](#) (IB)
- ❖ [Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service](#) (CCIVS)
- ❖ [International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies](#) (CIPSH)
- ❖ [International Council of Organizations of Folklore Festivals and Folk Arts](#) (CIOFF)
- ❖ [Education International](#) (EI)
- ❖ [International Association of Universities](#) (IAU)
- ❖ [International Council for Film Television and Audiovisual Communication](#) (IFTC)
- ❖ [International Council of Museums](#) (ICOM)
- ❖ [International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education](#) (ICSSPE)
- ❖ [International Council on Archives](#) (ICA)
- ❖ [International Council on Monuments and Sites](#) (ICOMOS)
- ❖ [International Federation of Journalists](#) (IFJ)
- ❖ [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions](#) (IFLA)
- ❖ [International Federation of Poetry Associations](#) (IFPA)
- ❖ [International Music Council](#) (IMC)
- ❖ [International Police Association](#) (IPA)
- ❖ [International Scientific Council for Island Development](#) (INSULA)
- ❖ [International Science Council](#) (ISC)
- ❖ [International Theatre Institute](#) (ITI)
- ❖ [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN)
- ❖ International Union of Technical Associations and Organizations (IUTAO)
- ❖ [Union of International Associations](#) (UIA)
- ❖ [World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers](#) (WAN)
- ❖ [World Federation of Engineering Organizations](#) (WFEO)
- ❖ [World Federation of UNESCO Clubs, Centres and Associations](#) (WFUCA)

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Equal Access to Education in the Middle East & North Africa

Introduction

Over 75 Million women and 45 million men in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are illiterate. Almost 50% of this population consists of youth and adolescents under the age of 24. 1 in 5 individuals in the MENA are between the ages of 10-24, holding the potential to become educators, changemakers, innovators, etc. Unfortunately, many of the states in the MENA lack the national education systems to support their youth and adolescents in formal and informal classroom settings. By unleashing the power of the youth, this region has the potential to channel the knowledge of an influx of young minds to address the region's most pressing political, social, and economic issues.

One indicator of the lack of education can be seen throughout MENA primary schools. In primary schools, students receive one textbook per subject, and this textbook serves as the sole source of information each year. Rather than teachers putting an emphasis on developing cognitive skills, it is left up to the youth as they choose how best to learn new information. The lack of a standardized method for cognitive development results in each child having to fend for themselves which can be difficult at such a young age.



Because many youth have different styles of learning, the textbook method of learning material is not suitable for a vast body of students. The lack of supplementary material such as videos, other reading material, group discussion, etc. makes topics of focus more difficult to understand for young minds. Because MENA focuses on traditional teacher-centered, rote learning many states' curricula are outdated. The majority of countries in the MENA rank in the bottom quartile of international learning outcome assessments such as the PIRLS and TIMSS while only half of children who do receive education opportunities meet the lowest benchmark scores in reading, mathematics, and science.

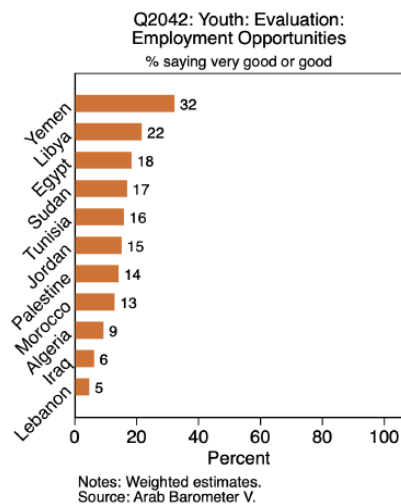
On average, states in the MENA spend four times more per student on individuals pursuing higher education than they do on primary-age children. Respectively, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco spent approximately 4, 8, and 15 times more on university-age students than they did on their youth pursuing mandatory primary school education. Many states in the MENA

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place a greater emphasis on higher education without realizing the detriment a lack of proper fundamental education can have on the long-term development of individuals. Although many nations in the MENA have the funding to adequately educate their youth, their lack of prioritization results in educational insufficiency.

Educational development plays a crucial role in both economic development and individual career development. Because many states in MENA lack the necessary educational infrastructure, students' abilities to secure jobs post-graduation decreases, negatively impacting the economy as a whole. Many of the educational systems that currently exist in the MENA put a stark focus on memorization over critical thinking and cognitive political skills. This style of education results in a passive mindset rather than an active learning mindset, playing into the reason many individuals have difficulty in the job market. Along with adopting a passive mindset, students also do not have the opportunity to receive preprofessional experience prior to entering the workforce. The MENA education system does not cater to the job market because the world of work requires critical thinkers and problem solvers, resulting in a 25% youth unemployment rate, higher than any other region of the world. Because of the decreased quality of education, each year of additional schooling in MENA only increases earnings by 5.4% per year compared to the international average of 7%. When the numbers are broken up further, an even more pressing matter emerges: the gender disparity within education.

Figure 6: Youth Employment Opportunities



Gender Disparity



Though gender disparity is experienced by women in states across the globe, discrimination is significantly more prevalent in the MENA. Women face a myriad of discrimination not only in societal settings but also politically as it is embedded into the law. Women and young girls are often treated as

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second-class citizens, with no legal protection against actions of violence they may experience. Sexual exploitation remains a pressing matter in the region while “marry your rapist” clauses embedded into the laws of many states simply exacerbate discrimination and promote the impunity of rapists and offenders. Young girls across the MENA live in fear of the possibility of child marriage, involuntarily having to remove themselves from the educational scene and accept family responsibilities. Conservative nations across the MENA prefer women's traditional role rather than trailblazing through education. Extremist religious groups along with political instability play a huge role in the mistreatment of women in the region.

Despite the lack of equity towards women in the MENA, females who are in school tend to perform well academically compared to other regions of the world. In nations across the globe, there is found to be an educational gender gap between boys and girls, but in the Middle East, the opposite is found to be true, resulting in a reverse gender gap. In many nations in this region, girls tend to outperform boys. In Middle Eastern countries such as Bahrain, Jordan, Iran, Palestine, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, the majority of schooling is gender segregated. In these classrooms, on average, the test results of girls are higher than boys. In states that opt out of gender-segregated classrooms, such as Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, boys tend to perform better overall. This trend has resulted in the acceptance of a generalized theory: in secular states that have mixed classrooms, boys outperform girls, but in non-secular states that utilize segregated classrooms, girls outperform boys. Although, it is to be noted that there are exceptions to this observation and further research is yet to be done on the issue.



Women who are defying social and political norms that caution against their higher education are currently outperforming men in most if not all subjects. According to data from UNESCO, the gross enrollment of women in higher education is increasing for 15 of the 22 states in the region and is not equal to or exceeds the rate of men enrolled in higher education. Although this is seen as a victory on the international stage, it is leading to complications, yet again shining light on the mistreatment and discrimination against females in the region.

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In Kuwait, women who want to pursue higher education in engineering must attain higher grade point averages than men for admission. In Oman, many females are forced to defer their university studies by a year which men are not required to do. This prejudice can also be seen in the job market. Despite receiving increased opportunities to pursue higher education, unemployment rates for women in the MENA are higher than in any other region. In Egypt, approximately 29% of females are unemployed, three times the rate of men in the country who are employed. Although women in the MENA have begun to use their power to drive educational change, their futures in the professional setting still remain doubtful.

Islamic Culture & Social Norms

The majority of states in MENA align with Islam both socially and politically, and because of this, there is an ongoing debate among scholars as to whether Islamic states promote or disapprove of secular education. Islamic culture has long had a presence in the educational advancement of the world, coining theories and providing intellectual contributions in the realms of mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, medicine, and poetry. Early Muslim rulers built libraries and educational welfare centers that revolved around promoting education and knowledge among their rulers, but as the political realm changed and leaders who prioritized the teachings of the Islamic religion over secular knowledge rose to power, the educational front changed as well.

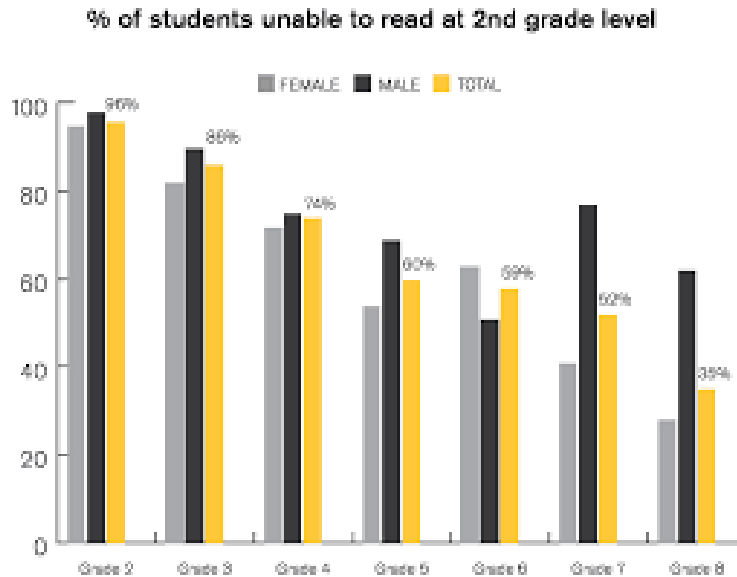
This shift resulted in a shift in learning as well. Islamic states promoted the religious teachings of past and present Islamic scholars over other types of knowledge that could be useful in pursuing professional opportunities. This shift in learning resulted in the MENA falling behind other nations in terms of education, resulting in the lack of equal access to education as seen today. Still, political leaders attempt to push for the prioritization of religious teachings over secular knowledge but now must compete with private educational systems that place value on secular teachings.

War/Conflict

Over the past 15 years, war and conflict have overtaken multiple states across MENA, having a devastating effect on civilians. The political turmoil and uncertainty have played a role in exacerbating educational disparities. Such conflict includes the Syrian Civil War, an ongoing conflict in Syria between President Bashar al-Assad and pro-democratic insurgents such as the Syrian Democratic Forces. Syria's central government has followed many authoritarian practices since 1971 at the beginning of the Assad regime when President Assad's father, Hafiz al-Assad,

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became president in 1971. In the early 2000s, Syria underwent a terrible drought, leading to widespread crop failures and the collapse of the agricultural sector, high levels of unemployment, and a large influx of migrants to urban areas. The effects of the drought combined with a struggling economy led to the first wave of pro-reform protests in 2011, and since then, tensions have escalated to an armed insurgency to combat and overthrow the Assad government. Throughout this conflict, children have been drastically deprived of proper education. So far in Syria, only one-third of schools in Syria are smoothly operating and are fully functional. The number of school dropouts increases sharply after the age of 11 as they enter the workforce in order to support their families. To avoid conflict, millions of Syrians have been displaced and seeking refuge in other countries, removing both students and teachers from institutions all over the country. And the money that should have been directed towards schools and education, has been redirected for the war, depriving students of the essential learning resources they need.

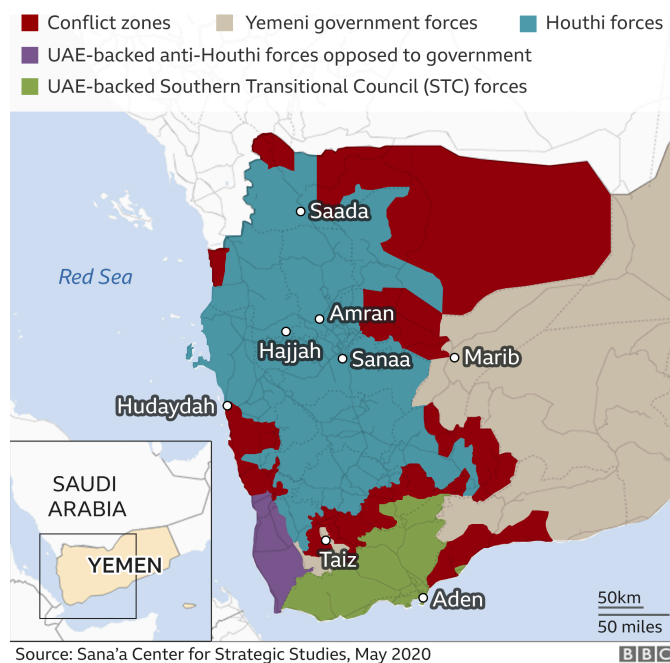


The Yemeni Civil War is another large conflict in the MENA filled with political turmoil that has affected civilians’ access to education. For the past 9 years, war has ravaged Yemen with Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who overthrew the Yemeni government, fighting a multinational coalition led by Saudi Arabia. The conflict has displaced more than four million people over its course and has led to the rise of medicine shortages, a lack of education, and the fragmentation of political divisions across the country. The conflict started with the Arab Spring protests in 2011 to overthrow President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the long-standing authoritarian government. This transition of governments led to an abundance of political instability, the perfect time for the Houthi rebels to take advantage of Yemen’s capital, Sanaa. The military division was split as

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some units aligned themselves with the Houthi forces and the rest remained loyal to the Hadi government. In order to push back the Houthis and restore the Hadi administration, a coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched a military intervention. Along with these groups, multiple factions formed including separatist groups and Islamist extremist groups, adding fuel to the raging fire of war across Yemen.

Yemen: Areas of control and conflict



Even before the conflict, the educational system of Yemen hadn't been providing substantial education to students for years due to a lack of resources, an inconsistent curriculum, and a shortage of teachers. This ongoing conflict severely affected education in the country as many schools have been damaged and destroyed throughout the years. Some schools have also been transformed into military barracks, limiting the accessibility of schools for millions of children. The large conflict has also negatively impacted the learning development of a plethora of children in Yemen due to the lack of consistent education, security, and stability. An estimated 10.6 million school-age children in the country have had deteriorating mental health and emotional development due to the war, which can continue and have profound consequences in the long term.

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Past Action: Western World Involvement & Non-Governmental Initiatives

Due to the lack of resources and ability for many civilians across the MENA, many Western countries have been involved in various initiatives to improve the education systems in these struggling regions. One of the



of the countries with some of the largest involvement in education reform in the Middle East is the United States of America. The Middle East Partnership Initiative, one of the three programs that the US carries out education reform in the Middle East, works to expand political participation, empower women and youth, and create educational opportunities in order to foster economic reform throughout the MENA. The Middle

East Partnership created multiple sub-initiatives to train individuals and help them better their lives by providing access to quality education, classes about business development, and enhancing civic participation.

USAID is another initiative created by the U.S. to further education across the MENA. Along with education, they specifically direct work with religious leaders to develop workbooks for the students and provide a formal education along with their religious work. This initiative has been successful at providing formal education at these religious schools known as madrassas to over 48,000 children.

The last program that the U.S. carries out is the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition program, an initiative created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This initiative tackles the issue of students, particularly young girls, missing out on education due to malnutrition and hunger. By offering school meals and teacher training, the initiative aims to motivate undernourished and underprivileged children to participate in school.

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The U.S., however, isn't the only country or organization committed to helping reform education in the MENA. UNICEF, one of the agencies of the United Nations, is responsible for providing humanitarian assistance to children in countries across the world. In the MENA, UNICEF has improved the quality of education by building and renovating schools, providing supplies, and creating safe learning environments. UNICEF also plays a vital role in providing support for refugee children and displaced populations by establishing temporary learning materials and trying to restore access to a formal education system.

COVID-19

COVID-19 took the world by storm in 2020, shutting the entire world down in a viral pandemic. At the height of the pandemic, there were over 3 million confirmed cases across the MENA, disrupting the lives of tens of millions of children in the region. Along with impacting their well-being and nutrition, the pandemic hindered their mental health and their cognitive development. Lockdowns, social distancing policies, and restrictions on gatherings led to the closure of schools across the region, disrupting the in-person learning model. There are many underdeveloped regions across the MENA with these shutdowns, so with limited access to technology and reliable internet, many students were unable to access educational resources. This digital divide rapidly increased the divide between marginalized and low-income communities, depriving them of a formal education.



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To combat this digital divide, many countries made creative alternatives to provide education to students virtually. One specific initiative was to broadcast educational content over television. Countries such as Egypt use television and radio channels to broadcast educational content for students who may not have access to the internet or electronic devices. Some governments distributed printed materials to students such as textbooks and workbooks for students to follow at home. This method was primarily used in rural and remote areas.

Bloc Positions

See below for various regions' stances on education. Utilize this information to formulate your country's stance on how educational disparities in MENA should be addressed and mitigated. Supporting evidence and information on some of the regions/specific countries have already been covered in the background guide up to this point. Though the information on Bloc Positions is definitely a starting point for your research, please ensure you are utilizing the enter guide and doing your own external research to be the most prepared for committee day.

Western Nations (United States, Canada, etc.):

Compared to the rest of the world, Western nations remain some of the most advanced when it comes to literacy rates and educational systems. The United States has a national literacy rate of 79% while Canada has a national literacy rate of ~90%. Western nations provide world-class educational infrastructure in terms of technology, facilities, and faculty. Along with in-class opportunities, Western nations also provide their students with high-quality research and pre-professional opportunities. Because of the emphasis placed on education in these nations, individuals go on to do well in the job market and professional environment as well. Despite the advances in education, Western nations remain an area of discrimination in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Efforts to mitigate such discrimination have been more effective in the past few years as institutions work towards increasing equity in education. See “Western World Involvement and Non-Governmental Initiatives” for more information.

European Union:

The European Union supports and encourages its member states to provide as thorough of an educational curriculum as possible to its students. Through its initiatives, the European Union aims to make lifelong learning a reality, improve the quality of education, promote equity & social cohesion, and enhance creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. The European Union

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supports multilingualism in its educational systems, providing a vast array of resources on language, encouraging mobility of students and teachers, and facilitating free-flowing exchanges of information and experience. The European Union emphasizes active learning over passive learning, offering a variety of educational opportunities to its students rather than simply prioritizing textbook learning. The European Union spearheads the [EU youth strategy](#) and the [Erasmus+ Programme](#) to training, funding, growth, and partnerships that work to enhance the educational opportunities of member countries' students. See [here](#) for summaries of various EU education legislation.

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa):

In recent years, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa have made it their mission to improve educational systems across the world. In collaboration with UNESCO, they have determined that there is a dire need for international cooperation in order to ensure that all children have access to education. BRICS has emphasized the importance of education to sustainable development, economic growth, and international strength and cooperation. BRICS has focused on access, quality, and equity as a means of broadening and strengthening educational growth. For more information, reference the official UNESCO report on BRICS efforts to improve education: [BRICS: building education for the future; Priorities for national development and international cooperation](#).

Non-Secular Regions of MENA (Bahrain, Jordan, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, etc.):

Non-secular regions of MENA tend to segregate their classrooms by gender to abide by religious and social norms. This segregation often results in females performing at more advanced rates overall compared to their male counterparts. See the “Gender Disparity” section of the background guide for more information.

Secular Regions of MENA (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, etc.):

Secular regions of MENA do not segregate their classrooms by gender as they put less emphasis on integrating religious and social norms into their educational systems. The lack of segregation often results in females performing at poorer rates overall compared to their male counterparts. See the “Gender Disparity” section of the background guide for more information.

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Questions a Resolution Must Answer

1. What course of action or forces should UNESCO utilize to improve education in the Middle East?
2. How can UNESCO put preemptive measures in place to mitigate war-related disparities in education?
3. Should UNESCO allow for nations outside of the Middle East and North Africa to exert their influence and educational policies on the region?
4. Should the Middle East and North Africa move away from an emphasis on non-secular education and towards an emphasis on secular teaching in education institutions?
5. Should states in the Middle East and North Africa shift funding away from post-secondary education and toward primary education? Does this reap long-term benefits?

Suggested Resource

1. [UNESCO's Action in Education](#)

Conclusion

The United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization contributes to peace and security by promoting international cooperation in the realms of education, science, and culture. Their research thus far on educational inequality in the Middle East and North Africa has served as the starting point for a topic that is yet to be researched further. This background guide is meant to serve as a starting point in your research. We encourage you to find past press releases, resolutions, and actions taken by your country to better understand your bloc position and fully emulate the UNESCO committee. We look forward to seeing you at the conference, and wish you the best of luck with your preparation!

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