Editorial

Back to school in the Arab world

Children across the world are returning to school after the holidays. Much more than most other places, educational systems in the Arab world face serious challenges when they are not going through tragic circumstances. Too many children in the Middle East and North Africa are out of school because they live in conflict zones, in dire poverty, are displaced and refugees or face conditions that are not conducive to receiving a decent education.

Furthermore, too many of the children who do make it to school and stay the course to graduate, find themselves woefully unskilled to succeed in a fast-changing world. The mismatch between education and the job market remains a major source of unemployment and social instability. Schools should enable students to master not only science, mathematics and the humanities but deep critical thinking, a culture of inclusion and the values of good citizenship. Anything else means the region’s schools are failing its children.

A recent study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides a revealing snapshot of at least one part of the problem. MENA countries figured in the bottom third of 76 counties surveyed to assess basic maths and science skills.

Of the MENA countries, the United Arab Emirates led the pack, if being ranked 45th out of 76 can be called a triumph. Tunisia was at number 64, followed by Saudi Arabia (66), Qatar (68), Oman (72) and Morocco (74). Clearly, MENA schools are perilously close to being bottom of the class in the dissemination of basic knowledge.

There is a recent report by UNICEF’s sister agency UNESCO, which estimates that many millions could avoid poverty if all adults had just two more years of schooling. Education, the report said, has had a positive, direct effect on poverty in developing countries from 1965 to 2010.

The region to benefit, systemic inadequacies need to be tackled. These include unsafe learning environments, lack of infrastructure, the absence of teaching materials, poorly prepared teachers and the lack of a learning culture at home or within the wider community.

Public education, which is suffering everywhere because of budget restrictions, lack of a learning culture at home or within the wider community. The systemic problems are compounded by conflict. War continues to take a heavy toll. For all the schools that have reopened in Mosul, liberated from the Islamic State (ISIS), and the same process is under way in Raqqa, UNICEF said the conflicts in Iraq and Syria have meant an additional 3.4 million children are missing out on an education with all the attendant implications for their economies and prospects. Then there’s Yemen and Libya.

That said, there are good news stories, too. It is heartening to hear of the eagerness with which girls in Mosul are returning to school after a three-year ISIS-imposed gap. Their schools have no running water or electricity and offer only the chance to learn. Their teachers’ dedication is inspirational. They work for free because the Iraqi government has not yet resumed paying salaries.

Then there is the art teacher who helps schoolchildren at the Zaatar refugee camp, Jordan’s largest, to cope with traumatic memories of the Syrian civil war by drawing rainbows and flowers instead of bombs and tanks. There is also Morocco’s stated determination to begin the school year with a new approach, which includes cutting class size and reducing teacher absenteeism.

There is no reason the Arab world’s youth cannot be given the chance to escape the spiral of under-education and dashed hopes. The way forward starts at school. Educational reform is needed, more than ever.

In anticipation of the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, publics, including Turkey and Iran, expressed serious concerns about the spread of the “independence virus” to the Kurds outside Iraq. It is only natural to resort to ISIS to stop the US-backed Kurdish expansion in northern Syria.

The Lebanese go about their internal affairs without realizing the importance of the major game being played out in their region. When the Americans occupied Iraq and handed it on a silver platter to Iran in 2003, the after-shocks unleashed reverberated in the Middle East and continue to be felt there today. The United States is content with watching events unfold in the region, intervening only when necessary.

Why should it do more when everything in the region is going to plan, a plan that calls for disintegration orchestrated by Iran, Russia and an obedient Syrian regime in the service of Israeli interests?

We know that nothing in the region happens by chance, including the relations between Hezbollah and the Syrian regime on one hand and with ISIS on the other. All three parties provide a wide range of services to each other. ISIS makes it possible for the Syrian regime and Hezbollah — and Iran by proxy — to claim they are fighting terrorism.

Iraqi Kurdistan will eventually become independent, no doubt about that. What’s more important is for the Lebanese to realize that their region is going through a critical phase and that they cannot overlook the overall US-Israeli coordination in the region.

A bigger game. An Iraqi Kurdish boy plays football past posters bearing the image of Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani and supporting independence in Erbil, on August 30.