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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE:** Exploring Transformations within Educational Spaces

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**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

Since the beginning of the 2000s we have witnessed a growing interest in education as a topic for academic research. These studies looked at the interplay between political, societal, and economical debates and education, highlighting intense transformations in the educational landscape of the middle east (Abi-Mershed 2010, Herrera 2022). A first category of studies (specially produced by international institutions, such as the World Bank) focused on the requests for economic development in the Arab world. While stressing the need for institutional and pedagogical reform and pointing at the weak contribution of education as an economic sector, these studies prized reforms in the direction of the elimination of gender gaps and increasing university enrollment in recent years (The World Bank 2008). Another prominent line of studies has historically looked at education against the backdrop of nationalism and citizenship formation (Andreson 2001). These studies stressed the role of education as an ideological battlefield and its relevance in citizenship formation and nation building processes in the Arab world (Alayan, Rohde, Dhouib, 2012). While most of the studies produced by scholars of the middle east within this realm focused on the analysis of educational material (both textbooks and curricula) for the study of Arabic language, history and citizenship education, critical voices challenged the understanding of a “knowledge society” as a national community. In this sense, a growing necessity to broaden the perspective to the interplay between local and international actors in the context of globalization (Adely 2012) (for example investigating inequalities in knowledge production and consumption between actors in the global north and in the global south) emerged. A last stream of academic works focused on Muslim students specifically, and on debates about identity formation in educational settings, in Europe and elsewhere. Such studies have often been driven by an approach that looked at education prominently as a security concern, especially after 2001 and 9/11, and at religious education as the main topic for analysis and reform (Doumato & Starret 2007). In parallel to these studies, research from the early 2000s highlighted a tendency towards the

decentralization of religious knowledge production and dissemination (for example through the expansion of informal networks of religious teaching) (Adely and Starrett 2011, Mahmood 2005). Together with other factors of recent transformation, such as the impact of privatization (Sobhy 2023) and the new markets for international schools and universities (Brunell 2019) and the role of technology (internet and social media) in fostering formal and informal knowledge production and dissemination after 2011, informal practices of learning have not yet been explored thoroughly. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of education, this panel encourages contributions that comprehensively encompass formal, institutionalized education and informal learning processes, and various educational levels. Education, in its broadest sense, extends beyond traditional classroom settings and includes the diverse ways knowledge is transmitted across locations, generations and communities. As such, the panel invites explorations into how educational institutions, as well as informal learning environments, contribute to and are shaped by societal transformations in the MENA region. Understanding the synergies and tensions between different educational forms and spaces as essential for comprehending the holistic impact on societal changes (encompassing shifts in cultural norms, economic structures, and social dynamics), the panel invites contributions focusing on different types of educational learning experiences and environments. Focusing on children, adolescents, or adults, contributors are encouraged to delve into the dynamic role of educational institutions and spaces in catalyzing and responding to processes of change and contamination within the region and beyond. The term "contamination" is employed here as a lens to examine transformative processes influencing and/or fostered by educational institutions in a broad sense. As such, the panel is open to contributions exploring the interplay between educational spaces and processes of change at the socio, cultural, religious, and economic level, including across:

**1) Educational practices**

as educational institutions evolve, they become crucibles for the intermingling of perspectives and methodologies. From traditional pedagogies to modern approaches (such as alternative education), the panel is open to papers that scrutinize how educational practices in the MENA region are evolving, how they are influenced by local, regional, and global trends, and how they, in turn, contribute to societal transformations.

**2) Class mobility**

by analyzing the impact of educational policies, access to quality education, and the role of vocational training, the panel seeks to identify the dynamics that shape class mobility in the region, as an integral facet of societal evolution. As such, the panel encourages contributions looking at how educational institutions serve as both facilitators and

barriers to class mobility, transforming the socio-economic landscape of the region.

### **3) Identity and cultural shifts**

cultural transformations are tied to education, shaping and being shaped by the values transmitted through educational institutions and in educational spaces. The panel is open to contributions that delve into how cultural practices and identities shape transformations in the educational landscapes and, vice versa, into how they transit and undergo shifts within educational realms. This includes, for example, the examination of language policies, curriculum development, and the role of cultural exchange programs in both responding to and fostering societal transformations.

### **4) Alterations in religious practices or approaches**

religious practices and approaches represent another layer of contamination that crosses the educational realm. The panel is open to contributions exploring the influence of educational centers in transforming and transmitting religious beliefs, rituals, and values. This includes an examination of the changing role of religious education, the approach to secularization and the emergence of alternative religious discourses within educational spaces across the region and beyond.

### **5) Mobility with/without migration**

mobility plays a crucial role in shaping educational landscapes, as individuals move across borders for educational opportunities. While being particularly pertinent in the MENA region, where a significant number of Arab students engage in regional and transnational mobility, this aspect remains understudied. The panel welcomes contributions that explore the impact of migration on education, including the challenges and opportunities faced by students and educational institutions involved in the migration process. This may involve examining the role of international educational hubs that host Arab students, exploring the dynamics of cultural exchange, and understanding how migration contributes to the evolution of educational practices and identities. Additionally, the panel encourages discussions on policies that facilitate or hinder the educational mobility of individuals within the region and beyond, aiming at broadening our understanding of how mobility influences and is influenced by educational institutions in the context of societal transformations in the MENA region.

The panel is open to contributions addressing the role of national educational institutions in the MENA region, as well as to papers addressing the broader context of Arab students' regional and transnational mobility, considered as a cross-cutting theme in the panel, and especially looking at international educational hubs hosting Arab students across the Middle East, North Africa and beyond.

Methodologically, the panel will aim at fostering a dialogue that transcends disciplinary boundaries, offering insights that are relevant to scholars interested in the complex interplay of education, culture, and societal transformations. As such, contributions relying on interdisciplinary perspectives and case studies will be particularly welcome.

#### Short bibliography

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Nijmi Edres is Assistant Professor in Islamic Studies at the Institute for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Society at the University of Bern. Previously, she held post-doctoral positions at the Universities of Bergen (where she was part of the project CanCode), Exeter and Göttingen (where she joined the international team working at the project USPPIP, Understanding Sharia: Past Perfect Imperfect Present) and at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media (GEI), in Braunschweig. She obtained her PhD from the University of Rome, Sapienza. Her scholarship looks at Palestine and Israel in the 20th and 21st centuries, paying special attention at Palestinian minority rights, Palestinian women's rights and at the legal debates developed by Palestinian Muslim judges with Israeli citizenship. Her research also looked at political Islam and the Islamic Movement inside Israel, at the connections between Islam, Arabic language and national (Palestinian and Jordanian) identity, and at educational policies in Jordan, in relation to gender inclusion and representation.

Noha Roushdy is a social anthropologist who studies privilege and inequality in contemporary Egypt. She received her PhD in anthropology from Boston University in 2021 and has an MA in Anthropology (2010) and a BA in Middle East Studies (2006) from the American University in Cairo. Her ongoing book project *Learning to be Egyptian: Class and Belonging in Egypt's International Schools* (under contract with SUNY Press) examines the making of elite youth in and around private international schools in Cairo. Based on her doctoral dissertation, the book draws on two years of ethnographic research with parents, teachers, students and former students. She was recipient of the Arab Council for the Social Science's Early Careers Scholars Award in 2022 and has been a postdoctoral researcher at the American University in Cairo and the French research center, CEDEJ, in Egypt. She currently works as postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bern's Institute for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Societies.

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