

The Social Sciences and the Arab World:

Challenges and Perspectives

for an International and Autonomous Social Science

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Thank you, Dr. Bauer, for introducing me so generously – I feel very honored to be here with all of you at the start of this important conference. Thanks also to DAAD, Dr. Hülshörster, Dr. Harms, for having me invited and thus given me the opportunity to be here today.

Distinguished guests, dear colleagues, dear friends,

I am more than grateful for this kind invitation which gives me the possibility to talk – but also listen to what will be presented and discussed over the next few days here in Cairo at this regional conference, and I am most eager to learn as much as I can from this. And I am also grateful for the possibility – through your invitation – to now share some thoughts with you on the overall topic of this conference, that is, to reflect on some more general aspects, challenges and perspectives for the social sciences in this region.

However, I also feel embarrassed and thought I might better have declined this invitation because I felt that speaking on the motto of the conference – “The State of the Social Sciences in the Arab World” – would require an Arab speaker rather than somebody flown in from a remote little totally non-metropolitan town somewhere in Europe which even most Europeans have never heard of. So I asked myself over the last days whether DAAD might have erred in the selection of the speaker tonight. But if ever that was an error, then the much bigger mistake was committed by myself to take on this task even though I am much too ignorant to be able to give an in-depth account on the state of social science in the Arab world. So...what shall we do now?

My suggestion is that I slightly change the topic in a direction I feel more comfortable with, and that would be to talk about some more general aspects which are in my view pertinent to the state of the social sciences in the Arab world, but also beyond. I will therefore just briefly skim over some of those aspects which I am convinced are at the heart of the question of how the social sciences in the Arab world, but for that matter, in any region will evolve in the future. More concretely, my question is about challenges and perspectives – the challenges and perspectives for what I would like to call an international and autonomous – or emancipated – social science.

But before I explain what I mean by an international and emancipated social sciences, let me very briefly address one question that many people often ask:

1.) DO WE ACTUALLY NEED THE SOCIAL SCIENCES - AND IF SO: WHAT FOR?

As you all know, the social sciences receive comparatively little funding when compared to applied sciences and natural sciences, and we need not go far from here to realize that there are countries in the world at whose universities you have great trouble in detecting any traces of sociology, political science, and – a bit less so – economics at all. One of the reasons for that arguably is the thorough commercialization/commodification of human life that has penetrated our lives since the 19th century industrial revolution: Values are today measured in rates of return rather than in good or bad today, and the term “value” itself is understood as “shareholder-value” at least as much as it is understood in its traditional sense, and even in a love affair you hear partners speak about the “investment” they put into their respective relationship as something that can pay off or not.

In brief: Whether we like it or not, we feel that we are forced to make gains in today’s world, and one purpose of science is to achieve – at least – gains in knowledge. Now, the gains resulting from an investment in engineering are obvious. In the social sciences they are far less so, at least to many people.

Among all academic disciplines, the social sciences are the one field that inquires into human beings and the nature of their interactions with one another, as organized within frameworks of social, economic and political systems. Why should this be interesting? Why should it pay off? Simply because the difference between social sciences and other disciplines is that the social sciences inquire not into how to augment the private good that benefits an individual enterprise or even an individual

person only, but into what we call the “public good”. The social sciences are therefore only relevant – and will only “pay off” – if we share the assumption

- that society needs to be organized so as to create a minimum of security that we wish to overcome the Hobbesian “*bellum omnia omnes*”, the state of war of all against all.
- that it is better to know whether I will still be in my job tomorrow,
- that we may wish to know that there are schools our children can go to once they reach school age, and affordable kindergartens before.
- that it is better to live in peace than in war, and that peace is not an automatic state of affairs, but needs mechanisms and public institutions for conflict resolution, conflict-prevention, and post-war reconciliation
- that in times when traditional family structures are increasingly breaking up, the provision of care for the very young and the very old in our societies is a rapidly growing challenge that within the private sphere will become increasingly difficult to resolve.
- The social sciences are also relevant if we assume that a growing population needs jobs for young people, and that – as we have experienced in the Arab world and elsewhere – the “invisible hand” of the market does not automatically provide solutions to these questions.
- On a theoretical level, it is largely uncontested and has convincingly been modeled by John Nash and other “beautiful minds” that a world in which everybody solely seeks for his or her own individual profit, this will not automatically lead to collectively optimal outcomes.
- This means also that we need rules to restrict the individual in his or her strife for personal gains – rules that establish what is allowed and what not, and we need impartial institutions that have the authority to set as well as to enforce those rules. Such institutions must be able to resolve conflicts that emerge between individuals and groups, and they must have the normative and physical power to sanction non-compliant behavior.

These are, of course, just a few very random remarks about the topics of social inquiry, which, I hope, nevertheless demonstrate the fact that social sciences are the field that deals with the big questions of public life that – if unresolved – will create victims every day. Put in economic terms: The costs of neglecting the social sciences are therefore very likely to outweigh the potential benefits of many other disciplines, and they are likely to outweigh them by a dramatically large margin. As social scientists, therefore, we are working to prevent the social costs that inevitably arise when such solutions are not found. – I think that is not only a legitimate, but also a noble mission.

In this sense, the social sciences are at the very core of public and private life - i.e. of human life - and many of the disciplines that seem so “useful” at first sight will become so; but they will be so only to the extent that they are put in the service of technically implementing solutions – technically implementing *intellectual* solutions to the great real world problems which social scientists have to provide. In this sense, then, the social sciences are a primary (as opposed to secondary) field of academic inquiry.

Let me now get back to my wish for the social sciences to be an *international and emancipated* science. Let me start with

2.) THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

... which actually has a global and a regional aspect to it.

Science in the 21st century is by definition international. It is a truism that the world has become globalized not only with regard to trade and investment, but also in the labor market, in communications, transport, and even in the realm of the global diffusion of intellectual thought, ideas and even the global availability of sets of norms and values which have often originated far from the places we live and yet impact on

our lives. But this of course holds for all disciplines. What, then, if anything, is so special about the social sciences?

I think there is something special about the social sciences in this process of globalization - and this is related to the fact that social scientists are distinct insofar as they are - consciously or unconsciously - always part and parcel of the issue they inquire into. Each of us examines social interactions of which he or she is part or could be part. That means, first: We are the subject of our research as much as we are its object. Therefore, as social scientists we operate under so incredibly more difficult conditions than, say, scholars in applied physics who, in their laboratories, can create test arrangements under sterile conditions and test their hypothesis for the validity of a neatly singled-out variable they can isolate. This is a sheer impossibility in social science research.

Second, we all have certain opinions and sets of beliefs, and these come along with norms and values which result from the context we have been brought up in and have been socialized in, and which we are embedded in in our professional lives as well. We lack a cloakroom where we could put them on a hanger like a coat before we start our inquiries. Rather, the opinions and beliefs we hold about the world inevitably come into play in our own work - and we as researchers are in constant interaction with the topic of our inquiry. But then, where is the problem?

Well, the problem is that norms and values differ both across time and across space. [...] And our beliefs and opinions will drag us toward using terms in our analyses which might carry emotional connotations that convey just these norms and values. This means that the more social science becomes globalized, the more we must be aware of the fact that our colleagues and readers may not necessarily share the norms and values we entertain ourselves. And - this is more important than usually assumed - we must be aware of the fact that in international debates, other people may not necessarily understand the same things even when we use the same words.

Let me give you a very simple and banal example: Since one month, I have a new colleague at the institute where I am teaching. Now, the junior professorship he holds has an official denomination that is called "chair for intergenerational justice".

If we asked in this room: “Who is in favor of intergenerational justice?” we would probably all agree that intergenerational justice is a good thing to have. Nevertheless, the German and Egyptian contexts in which we are located are pretty different from one another in this respect:

Germany has a demographic challenge in that birthrates have declined so much that the age-pyramid is virtually reversed and more and more elder people have to be financed by a young generation in which, decreasing in number, mathematically, one working person will have to finance two older persons who are no longer able to earn their own living. Pension funds are running empty, and the burden for the younger generation to shoulder is increasing, not only posing a drain on their current lives, but also in the future when they will be old. In addition, public debts have assumed levels that pose heavy burdens for generations to come and of which nobody knows how they could possibly be handled. Statistically, every new-born baby in Germany today sees the light with an average of more than 50'000,- Euros in debt, and that figure is growing rapidly.

Egypt also has a demographic challenge, but one that looks almost opposite: There is no lack of young and capable persons who are willing to enter the labor market, but there is a huge challenge to provide them with adequate opportunities to set free their capacities in jobs that are not only nominally a job, on paper, but which would also enable them to make a decent living and maybe one day feed a family.

Thus, very likely, the specific kinds of problems we have in mind when speaking about intergenerational relations will differ quite significantly even though we might agree to a certain term. It is quite obvious, therefore, that the social sciences in a process of globalization face challenges that might potentially work to disunite the scholarly community.

On the other hand, there are also factors which work as unifiers rather than as separators: Increased mobility, new means of communication through which research results are more quickly spread than ever before, and through which academic communication, debate, and cooperation is accelerated to an amazing degree all work to counter the disuniting aspects just mentioned. Nevertheless, or rather: Therefore,

international cooperation and exchange are more important than they have ever been before. The question is: *How* do we cooperate, and I shall get back to this in a second.

A second question can be asked. Having talked until now about globalization, and about the social sciences, this second question would read: Is there anything specific to the social sciences in the *Arab world*? One very obvious point is a potentially huge advantage, and that is the fact that there is a common language that is understood throughout the region. In Europe, despite the process of European integration, we are still struggling to comprehend different academic cultures and to understand each other and despite the massive expansion of student and staff exchange activities. Of course, for Europeans this requires some adaptations.

(At my university, for instance, we send our students to Helsinki and Bucharest, confident that they will have courses offered in English and not in Finnish or Romanian, but on the other hand foreign students coming to Tuebingen often face difficulties because there are still many who expect proficiency in the German language from students coming from abroad. Obviously, there is some homework to be done for us....)

However, this potential advantage the Arab world has in achieving greater and deeper intra-regional exchange has not fully materialized until now, and much more gains could be made if an increase in regional interactions and exchange could be established. As the Arab Knowledge Report of 2009, published by UNDP, states: *“Joint research projects among Arab scientific research institutions working in similar fields remain extremely rare – even within the same country.”* One cause for this is certainly the manifold and overlapping conflicts that are present in this region – which in turn can be traced back in their causes to the heritage of former colonial powers. But to some extent they are also home-grown, resulting from intra-Arab rivalries, a lack of regional integration in the academic sphere as well as in other walks of social and economic life, and in an overall incentive structure that serves to obstruct rather than to encourage such intra-regional cooperation.

On a global level, there is also room for greater integration of the Arab world into the international social science community. However, European and American govern-

ments and research institutions also bear part of the responsibility to turn this perspective into reality. Such integration requires efforts from both sides, and the present conference is an excellent opportunity in this respect.

Getting back to the question of how cooperation should look like, I am convinced that one main issue – maybe *THE* central issue – is that any form of cooperation must be taking place on eye-level between partners who consider each other as equals. But since social science often tends to be looked upon with skepticism by Arab governments, local funding is far below what is needed to produce high quality research. This results in a problem; let me quote the *2009 Arab knowledge report* again which states that:

“It is ironic that while Western agencies show an increased interest in social sciences in the Arab world and offer direct and generous funding for it, such interest is absent among Arab governments and institutions. Thus the increasing marginalisation of social science research drives serious researchers towards increasing dependence on foreign programmes and funding”

This renders foreign partners into “donors” who risk viewing themselves as benevolent aid givers - rather than as partners on an equal footing in a relationship in which they can learn *as* much from their partners as vice versa.

I would like us, in our future endeavors of cooperation, to reflect this problematique and be aware of it because this needs to be taken into account from the outset, from the very design of cooperation activities.

3.) AUTONOMY / EMANCIPATION

Let me now turn to my second issue, the autonomy of the social sciences or, as I had it in my first draft: emancipation. Why do I speak of autonomy or emancipation - and emancipation from what? Actually it was a former resident of this city – at least for some time - who first emphasized the need for the sciences to be independent (*al-ulum al-mustaqilla*), and this guy’s name, of course, was Ibn Khaldun – the famous Ibn Khaldun whose work the British Historian Arnold Toynbee considered “undoubted-

ly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place”, and which was considered by Franz Rosenthal “the earliest attempt made by any historian to discover a pattern in the changes that occur in man's political and social organization.”

Science, and in *particular* the social sciences, necessarily need to have a conducive environment in order to produce high quality and innovative results. Such an environment, in turn, arguably depends on a rather broad range of factors; and during this conference, many of these factors will be subject to more in-depth analysis as you have seen from the program. Last year's *Arab Knowledge Report* stated that

Despite the proliferation of colleges of social and human sciences, as well as public and private research centres, social science remains the “poor cousin” of Arab research and is not paid sufficient attention

Now, this sounds rather sobering and deserves a closer look. I maintain that this might be due to a low level of emancipation of the social sciences from a variety of factors which impact negatively on their performance. Let me therefore briefly mention some of those factors which I think are particularly important with a view to the current state of the social sciences in the Arab world. But we should also bear in mind that these are factors whose presence is not restricted to the Arab world. Rather, they also exist in Europe or in “the West” in a more general sense, albeit probably in a different composition as regards their relative weight. The selection I have made here is limited to four factors, which in their sum would seem to point to one overarching factor.

The first relates to funding, the second to the dissemination of research results, the third to a sometimes problematic and less than conducive relationship between the political sphere and the social sciences, and the fourth to cooperation within academic circles. Of course, the whole range of factors which make for a strong or poor performance of the social sciences is much larger, but I take these four as exemplary instances which have a particular relevance for the future performance of Arab social science.

1.) Support to the Social Sciences from the Public and Private Sectors

There is a large funding problem the social sciences have to cope with – both in the West and in the Arab world. In the Arab world, this is rather dramatic: At *AUB in Lebanon*, for instance, out of the total support to research projects, only 9 % go to the social and human sciences. At the *Lebanese National Council for Scientific Research*, the rate is only 5 % , and available data demonstrate that these figures are comparable in most Arab countries. If we break this down again into individual disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, literature takes the lead, followed by law and history, and only at the lower end follow the three core social sciences: sociology, economics, and – alas – on the very last place: political science.

While private industry's priorities understandably lie elsewhere than in the social sciences, it follows from that that it is the state's task to provide a lion's share of funding for our disciplines. This, however, is a role Arab states do not seem to be all too keen on assuming - and European governments are actually not far behind in this obvious neglect of support to what I have called "primary sciences". But there is another issue:

2.) The Social Sciences and the Dissemination of Research Results

Results of research need to be made publicly available in order to be received by the scholarly community and, eventually, be put to use. In this context, the figures relating to the Arab world are quite worrisome and give rise to serious concern:

Speaking for a second of science and technology, i.e. the "hard" sciences only, 14'800 peer-reviewed articles have been published by Arab scholars during the decade from 1998 to 2007. If you think this is a lot, then consider that Turkey alone published some 10'000 such articles over the same period of time. What is more, if we take all university-professors, plus all those university faculty who at least holds a Ph.D. together, and add to these the fully employed staff with similar qualifications in extra-

university research centers, we arrive at an estimated number of around 210'000 researchers in the Arab world. They produced, on average, an annual 5'000 research papers – which is equal to an average of 2.4 papers per year per one hundred scholars.

As regards the social sciences more particularly, a 2008 study by Hanafi is revealing:

“A survey of twenty-two journals published during 2007 in the USA, Canada, and Europe, four of which were specialised in the Arab region, showed that only two studies were published by Arab researchers residing in Arab countries. Yet most Arabic language periodicals in the social sciences are of extremely poor quality by global standards, are highly local in nature, and do not adhere to neutral peer-review methods”

Obviously, there is quite some way to go if the potential of Arab social science is to be fully realized as regards the dissemination of the knowledge produced in the region.

One important part of this issue is not only the productivity of scholars, but also the publishing industry, as regards books as well as academic journals. For many companies, it is not worthwhile to publish high quality academic research because the market will be small despite the linguistic advantage. Nevertheless, the potential Arab social science publishing market is certainly larger than the few well-known publishers such as very few high-profile emanations from the *markaz dirasat al-wahda al-arabiyya* in Beirut or the few equally reputable publishers in Cairo. In this context it must be noted that recently, a range of Arab publishers, and in particular ones that operate as research centers such as the *Gulf Research Center* in Dubai, have added diversity to the social science literature in the Arab countries, and this is complemented by publication series of other academic institutions. This process is bound to continue and represents a real element of dynamics that gives reason to hope for an improved publishing scene in the mid-term future. What is also encouraging is that the number of joint international publications published by Arab scholars in co-authorship or co-editorship with European and other non-Arab colleagues has risen dramatically over the past few years.

So, yes: it is true that some Arab countries have seen promising activity in social science research, but, and I quote the *Arab knowledge report* again: “it is also true that

this improvement remains much weaker than the development of research in the basic sciences and technology”

In brief, there is a problem in the productivity and the dissemination of social science research that is not limited to, but particularly pronounced in the Arab world. This issue, however, might in part be traced back to a yet more important point I would like to hint to, and this is the question of

3.) *The Social Sciences and their relation to the political sphere*

Both in the Arab world and in Europe, the relationship between the social sciences and practical politics, and between social scientists on the one hand and political elites on the other, is usually uneasy. However, maybe this is even more so in the Arab world than in Europe, and I suspect that one of the reasons for this is a misunderstanding by political decision-makers that can quite frequently be observed:

Social science is all too often equated with social activism, or – in the case of political science – even with political activism which is considered by some politicians as unwelcome or even perceived as a threat. What we need is an enhanced understanding between both sides; an understanding that the professional activity of each side differs fundamentally from the respective other’s activity and that each requires different pre-requisites in order to fulfill her duties:

Politicians are engaged in trying to achieve what is possible, or, as the proverb goes, in the art of the feasible. This means that they need enough leeway to take political decisions irrespective, for instance, of ideological dogmas which some intellectuals might be tempted to impose on them. By contrast, social scientists need both, access to all necessary information, as well as the room to engage in analyses and to engage in debates with their colleagues in a competition for the best concepts and ideas. It harms both sides if one tries to influence the other to an inadequately high extent, especially if and when the other side does not want that. If a politician doesn’t want to be advised, I will have a hard time make him swallow my advice. And vice versa,

social science cannot produce high quality output if restricted by undue political considerations.

France's historical social scientists, for example, occur to have largely failed in working up the country's colonial history in Algeria which is still absent from French textbooks, whereas French politicians reiterated a similar mistake in what many viewed as their tacit agreement to the Algerian military's 1991 coup from above – an error that led to the death of over 100'000 victims during the Algerian civil war.

Similar inconsistencies would likely also include Western social scientists – and subsequently Western politicians – who demanded democratic reform in the Arab world, and afterwards chose to ignore a democratic election result, as has been the case four years ago in Palestine.

These and other instances bear witness to a frequent and general uneasiness of the relationship between politics and social science in international contexts, but there is also a temptation for politicians to exert undue influence on science on a national level by trying to prescribe the fields scholars should engage in and which ones not. This is also a factor that has a real potential to threaten the overall quality and performance of a country's social science research. It is thus in their own interest for politicians to clearly understand and respect the fact that social scientists aim not at political *insurrection*, but at a *resurrection* of the effective production of knowledge and that the profession of social scientists is (analysis) is not the same as activism.

Access to information is another vital necessity for any kind of research, and that holds true even more for social scientists. This includes, but is not limited, to the fact that social scientists need not only to access accurate data, but also to be able to engage in discussions and interviews with whoever is relevant for the topic they are inquiring into. Unfortunately, there are still politically motivated restrictions on such activities in some Arab countries that might be based on the misunderstanding I just mentioned.

This is also why two colleagues of mine (Clem Henry and Bob Springborg), in their 2001 book called "Globalization and development in the Middle East", labeled Arab

governments as “information-shy regimes”, in which information is sometimes handled in prohibitively secretive ways – and clearly, this has in the past blocked social science in a number of Arab countries from realizing their full potential.

The further development of free media which will provide for alternative sources of information is a key factor that has already come to play, and which will continue to impact more positively on the evolution of the social sciences. In particular, transnational Arab media are important here, but also news fora and even internet blogs play a crucial role in this respect.

The free flow of information makes just as much part of overall freedom as the freedom to choose objects of inquiry without being bound by economic restrictions that result from a marketization of research and without being bound by political restrictions that result from an overly cautious political setting. Economic and political resources are needed to create an enabling environment for the social sciences, and if too few hands take hold of them and monopolize them, this is harmful. I am not a fan of neoliberal economics, but it still holds true what Economics Nobel laureate Milton Friedman wrote in his chef-d’oeuvre *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) almost half a century ago, namely that “the greatest threat to freedom is the concentration of power” – and this holds within and outside the social sciences. Again, Ibn Khaldun’s famous definition of “government” comes to mind which he considered to be “an institution that serves to prevent injustice - other than such as it commits itself” ...

Having said that, I also wish to stress that despite all existing challenges, there are beautiful examples of brilliant social science and of social scientists who not only *come* from the Arab world, but *continue to reside and work* in Arab countries, and who produce excellent research. – I need not name examples to you tonight; a good range of the kind of colleagues I am speaking of is present in this room. Things get a little bit more difficult when it comes to institutional performance on a level above the individual researcher. But – speaking here in Cairo: This is a place where we do find many examples that very ambitious research can actually be produced. We have seen here, as well as in other parts of the Arab world, a mushrooming of newly founded

colleges, universities, and research centers. And while this is not in itself a guarantee for high-quality research, it is certainly a very encouraging sign.

Even the thin ice on which think tanks are working in the field between policy on the one hand and pure academia on the other has been mastered impressively by institutions such as the IDSC – only last week a scholar – a graduate from Cairo University now working in Italy – told me that he now no longer needs to search the IMF’s website for data in his research project, but that he can just click on the IDSC website and can download the data he needs from the primary source.

4.) *Social Sciences and National and International Cooperation*

I have already said some things on the question of international cooperation:

The first important point is that the legal frameworks and institutional capacities *within the Arab world* need to be geared towards deeper cooperation. While some encouraging signs are on the horizon, there still is much room for improvement.

On the level of *cooperation between Arab and Western countries* in the social sciences, one or maybe *the* key issue is for partners to interact on a basis of equality and not in hierarchical terms. Another issue would be an enhanced incentive structure for deeper cooperation to be established by Arab authorities so that funding structures might become less unilateral than they are at the moment. [[The willingness from the scholars’ side – and this is something I have experienced myself time and again – is there.]]. In this light, of course, the many newly founded satellites of American and European universities in the region are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they do contribute to enhanced cooperation, but on the other, such cooperation also runs the risk of reinforcing existing patterns of inequality.

What seems important is that in our cooperation, we need to focus on those issue areas on which we might have different perspectives; but this fact must not lead us to shy away from tackling the big questions of social, political and economic life, be-

cause it is precisely in these fields where we will find shared and, indeed, universal goals which facilitate mutual understanding and mutual learning processes.

4.) CONCLUSIONS

I hope that it has become clear during my talk that there are three core issues which make for the social sciences to be good and relevant: First and foremost, it needs freedom.

A last quote from the Arab Knowledge Report:

“The development of the human and social sciences in the Arab world remains dependent on the fostering of an enabling environment for knowledge that guarantees the freedom of expression and the flow of information and strengthens the political participation of both citizens and researchers.”

Second, it must be embedded in an increasingly international context, and third, it needs our continuous struggle for support -and against neglect- by state and private institutions. And while these three points hold true for the Arab world, I end up where I started from: All these core issues are not peculiar to the Arab countries, but go for European social science as well even though the individual points will acquire different relative weight across different regional contexts.

I therefore hope that this conference will not only be an opportunity to discuss some of the issues I raised in greater detail, but that it may also be a step towards deeper and closer cooperation between Arab and Western scholars. While encouraging signs of a new dynamics can be observed, the challenges we are facing on the way to a yet more international and yet more emancipated social science remain significant, and I am convinced that we had better side with one another in order to successfully take on these challenges and master them.

Thank you for your attention and for your patience.