

# Regional Education Organizations in the Arab World

## A Case Study of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO)

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*While there are innumerable studies about global international organizations (IOs) in education, the role of regional organizations seems overshadowed by more powerful actors in the field, the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Although they are important in their regions, little is known about them and their interactions with global IOs. This research reveals new insight regarding the role that regional organizations play in the design of education policy in the Arab world, including all 22 Arab-speaking states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region that is defined by a common language, culture and religion, and how these policies are shaped by the interaction between regional and global IOs. Using a postcolonial framework, a qualitative case study was conducted of a regional IO focusing on the Arab world and an important actor in education policy: the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO). The analysis reveals how the ALECSO is unmoored between two trends that pull it in different directions: its spoken aim to counter Western hegemony in the region, and the dominance of certain IOs that necessarily define other organizations' work.*

**Keywords:** ALECSO, international organizations, regionalism, policy diffusion, postcolonial theory.

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## Intr Odu Ct IOn

Since the creation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, the world has witnessed a surge in the number of international organizations (IOs) created to coordinate between nation-states on varying issues. The importance of international cooperation became more obvious with the end of colonization in the 19th century and the independence of nations, demanding to play a role in global politics and establishing themselves as legitimate sovereign states. According to the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Union of International Associations, 1990), the number of IOs went from 5 to around 280 between 1900 and 1990, with almost 30% created in the period between 1965 and 1974, coinciding with the era of decolonization. Stemming from the need for stability with nations attempting to maintain peace and avoid further conflict, IOs today “continue to exist, even to thrive, after their original purpose has disappeared or become far less relevant” (Armstrong and Redmond, 2004, p. 7). They have done so by shifting their attention to issues that are seen as underlying for sustainable economic development, such as health, education and even the environment (Heyneman & Lee, 2016).

In the Arab and Muslim world, a similar process took place following decolonization, where the need for cooperation was even more pressing for these newborn states, looking for the opportunity to prove themselves and establish their presence; hence the creation of regional organizations around the same time. At their foundation, these organizations were concerned with asserting Arab states’ political independence in a postcolonial context, through economic independence and cooperation among Arab states, but eventually following the same global trends: Regional organizations including the League of Arab States (LAS) moved to focus on other issues and created specialized organizations to unify the regions’ states on important issues. In emulation of global organizations, the LAS founded the Arab League’s Education, Culture and Science Organization (ALECSO) in 1970, focusing on education in the Arab region and aiming to unify and protect Arab culture in the region’s education systems.

## Pr ObLEm StAt EmEnt

It can easily be argued that not enough attention is given to the non-leading IOs in global education and that besides “official reports from IOs such as the World Bank (World Bank, 2008, 2013) and UNESCO’s Education for All national and regional reports analyzing the quality

of education,” there is little scholarly work exploring the regional aspect of educational quality in the Arab region (Morgan, 2017, p. 499). The objective of the research was to discover more about the ALECSO, an ideal empirical case study for exploring the role of IOs in a regional context, especially one as understudied as the Arab and Muslim world. The ALECSO itself is also an understudied organization, and as a specialized organization of the LAS, it does not have much recognition. This gap in the knowledge poses a legitimate question around the rationale of why they do what they do despite not being recognized as a major player. I seek to understand how the ALECSO as an IO views its role within the region; according to their charter, the organization’s aim is to work only for the benefit of its member states. However, as highlighted by Barnett and Finnemore in *The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations* (1999, p. 699), “many IOs exercise power autonomously in ways unintended and unanticipated by states at their creation,” and thus they are affected by outside factors that change the direction of the organization. In this research, I examine whether this is the case for the ALECSO, or if the organization has stayed true to its mission of only acting in the benefit of its member states.

The geographical scope of this paper is the “Arab world,” a label that defines countries based on their national language, but also a specific cultural and religious background, sharing aspects of the Islamic civilization as well as a common colonial history that binds them and makes them an interesting cluster to study together. The Arab countries considered include all 22 member states of the ALECSO.<sup>1</sup>

The research has focused on the following questions:

- a) How does the ALECSO as a regional organization select its educational policies for the region?
- b) How are these policies shaped by the interaction between regional and global IOs?

## t h E O r E t I C A L F r A m E w O r k A n d A P P r O A C h

Although postcolonial theory originally stems from literary and cultural studies (most famously Edward Said’s [1978] *Orientalism*), it is now applied in social sciences to explain phenomena that shape the world order in modern times. Regarding education, it argues that today’s neocolonial powers follow the same domination strategies as the colonial powers did during the days of colonization, and so they

prescribe the education policies of the so-called developing countries through numerous methods, including provision of loans and technical assistance for educational reforms (Anwaruddin, 2014). Technical assistance might include sending large numbers of teachers and trainers to developing countries, providing scholarships for students and teachers to study in the West and learn about Western traditions of curriculum and pedagogy (Anwaruddin, 2014; Martens & Niemann, 2018). The objective of postcolonial theory became the deconstruction of prevalent hegemonic theories of modernity, economic development through neoclassical methods, and global cooperation that inherently means dependency. I am interested in studying how postcolonial theory can explain the status of the ALECSO today, and its role within the global educational field.

Based on the theoretical framework and from the readings in preparation for this research, my hypothesis is that the role of regional organizations is limited and affects national policy making to a lesser extent than global IOs do. Although their claim is to counter global hegemony over education policy and to establish regionally specific guidelines and structures, they eventually get lost in the sea of more influential IOs (Akkary, 2014). Hypotheses as to why regional organizations are less influential than global ones include their lack of funding, qualified experts, or appealing policies that lead to economic development (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004, Rizvi, 2007, Olaniran & Agnello, 2008; Akkary, 2014). Global IOs, some of which are economically driven, have been known to promote policies that can make populations “economically useful,” which has “involved the extension and expansion of institutions such as education and training as well as the development of greater statistical and other kinds of knowledge about populations in low-income countries” (Tikly 2004, p. 178). Global education organizations tend to be more alluring as they present themselves as the leaders on the issue, offering international standardized knowledge-based solutions, but more importantly, proposing policies that claim to lead to economic development. The fact that these are often Western capitalist, neoliberal ideas is not always questioned by the receiving countries (Tikly, 2004).

The research was conducted using a postcolonial framework, considering the history of the region that helps contextualize and explain why power relations are the way they are. Postcolonial theory seeks to explain issues of opposition, privilege, domination, struggle, and resistance (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004). Postcolonial approaches have

contributed to extending our understanding of policy borrowing between states among former colonial euro-centric powers and “others” (Bhambra, 2014):

[T]hey draw attention to the false universalism of globalization and show how contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural practices continue to be located within the processes of cultural domination through the imposition of imperial structures of power. (Rizvi, 2007, p. 257)

Steiner-Khamsi (2004, 2012) and Shahjahan (2013, 2016) have tackled the issue of power relations between global IOs and other actors such as national governments and local organizations within the education sphere, especially concerning policy diffusion and travel. In “Transfer and Translation of Policy” Stone (2012) explores literature around the role of IOs in policy diffusion. Although “diffusion” and “transfer” might explain the conscious spread of policies and ideas between countries, “convergence” represents a counter-idea explaining spread of policy that is not seemingly logical, better describing institutional isomorphism as a result of “path dependencies” and the taken-for-granted situations where actors follow shared interpretations, schema, and meanings (Ladi, 2011).

The power of global IOs is pronounced in this respect by promoting one-sided policies on an international scale. Notes Fasheh, “Their power lies in what they exclude and their capacity to replace one form of knowledge with another” (Fasheh, 1990, p. 24), reinforcing educational inequality by marginalization. More recently, constructivist studies highlight how international agencies and governments actively construct theories of action (Ruggie, 1998; Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). Scholars have framed IOs’ education initiatives within “client countries” as neocolonial domination, suggesting that IOs reproduce client dependencies, limit local decision-making, and promote one-size-fits-all solutions based on Western knowledge and neoliberal ideology (Anwaruddin, 2014; Collins & Rhoads, 2010). Neocolonial forms of domination are grounded in unequal economic relationships and manifest through cultural domination and/or political interference (Young, 2001). Examples of dominant policies in education exported to the region revolve mainly around English-language education as a tool to establish Western hegemony (Ghabra, 2010; Olcott, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2016) and privatization of education, in line with neoliberal economic policies (Ibrahim, 2010). Such trends are promoted as norms, in the name of globalization and internationalization.

Finally, booming in the 19th century, the idea of Pan-Arabism stems from anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-zionist feelings that were bubbling at the surface. Mellon's 2002 article "Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism and Inter-State Relations in the Arab World" highlights that it is important to note that most countries in the Middle East did not start seeing themselves as "nations" in the modern sense until the 18th and 19th centuries, when "focus on language and the determination of nationality typically on the basis of a shared language developed [ . . . ] in Europe" (p. 2). Interestingly, albeit Arab in principle, Pan-Arabism seems to emanate from European examples: "Pan-Arabism as a form of nationalism represents both an imitation of the West, and a reaction against the West" (Mellon, 2002, p. 2).

## t h E ALECSO

The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization is a Tunis-based specialized institution working under the umbrella of the League of Arab States. It is essentially concerned with the development and coordination of activities related to education, culture, and sciences in the Arab world. It was established through Article 3 of the Arab Cultural Unity Charter, and was officially announced in Cairo on July 25, 1970. The members of the ALECSO are the same as those of the Arab League, meaning all 22 Arabic-speaking States in the Middle East and North Africa. As stated in Article 1 of its Constitution,<sup>2</sup> ALECSO was established with the aim of promoting Arab intellectual unity through education, culture, and sciences, and enhancing the educational, cultural, and scientific level in the Arab world so that it can positively contribute to universal civilization (ALECSO, 1972). Within this overall objective, ALECSO performs a number of tasks, including, in particular, (a) upgrading the level of human resources in the Arab World; (b) providing favorable conditions for the development of education, culture, sciences, the environment, and communication in the Arab world; (c) promoting and disseminating the Arabic Language and the Arab-Islamic culture in the Arab world and elsewhere; and (d) establishing channels of dialogue and communication with other cultures worldwide.

The organization's Constitution establishes the diplomatic and coordination role of the organization on the following issues:

- a) Coordination of Arab efforts in the fields of education, culture and science.
- b) Supporting Arab cooperation to develop Arab educational systems.
- c) Coordinating the efforts of Arab civil society institutions.
- d) Coordinating the efforts of Arab countries in developing and updating curricula and methods of teaching and learning the Arabic language. (ALECSO, 2014, pp. 5–6)

## mAln POLICIES And Str At EgIES

The ALECSO has a number of different strategies and policies that it promotes through its different departments. In the education department, ALECSO policies are mainly guided through the “Strategic Plan for the Development of Education in the Arab World” developed by the ALECSO and its members in 2008 at the Damascus Conference; it is an overarching plan for improving the quality of education in all member countries. The organization’s policies are also very much guided by global frameworks such as the UN’s SDG 4, as well as UNESCO and World Bank (WB) guidelines (ALECSO, 2016; El Harby, 2019).

## mEth OdS And SOur CES

In order to answer the study’s research questions, I have conducted a qualitative case study of the ALECSO as an example of a regional education organization in the Arab world. Conducting an in-depth study of one organization may help explain some aspects of its role in shaping education policy in the region, and how that role is influenced by leading IOs (Hartley, 2004). This research follows the instrumental case study design, exploring a case as one instance of a specific issue; in this case a particular type of organization within the full range of IOs, which may suggest something about regional organizations in general (Cousin, 2005).

The analysis was conducted using a specific postcolonial lens to identify trends of resistance to or coordination with global IOs within the organizations’ discourse. Within that framework, I have used a thematic analysis approach (TA), a method for identifying and analyzing patterns of meaning (themes) in qualitative data. During the research, I was looking for signs and patterns in the analyzed documents as well as in the interviewees’ speech. It was sometimes quite

clear how ALECSO views global IOs as a guiding light for their work, but sometimes it was also subtle in the way they phrase certain policies, which reflects how they tend to imitate global trends and look up to them.

The study has relied heavily on primary data collected through an extensive desktop review of the organizations' own publications (research, policy briefs, strategic documents, etc.) and publications from partner organizations that work with the ALECSO. I also conducted two interviews that complemented the research. My original plan was to conduct a qualitative study mainly based on interviews and complemented by secondary data, but as the research took place during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, I had to revise my plans in the final design. So, in order to understand what the organization views as its role in designing and shaping education policy in the region, and to answer my first research question, I used the available online materials. The main publications that I used in my review are shown in Table 1. For the second research question (b) I have conducted two in-depth expert interviews with key organization staff, done remotely through Zoom. Due to the difficulty in reaching a large number of ALECSO staff (it is a small organization, and not many staff responded to my requests for interviews), the interviewees were then treated as "elite," and the findings were used to complement the findings from the document review (Natow, 2019). As Kezar (2008) notes, it is challenging to acquire a large number of "elite interviews," and therefore it is important to start with extensive desktop research. The interviews were semistructured in order to better understand how the staff view the organization's interaction with global IOs, guiding participants in the inquiry but also allowing them freedom to discuss topics they deemed relevant after explaining the purpose of the study. The benefit was that the two participants were strategically positioned (ex)staff within the organization, and so their inputs were quite valuable. Interviewee 1 provided the official view of the organization and the stance it conveys for itself, which was important in feeding into research question (a), while interviewee 2 gave a thorough analytical outlook of the organization from someone who was quite involved in most aspects and departments of the ALECSO and played an important role in the decision- and policy-making processes.



**Table 1.** Online Resources Used

Document title	Year	Type	Language
ALECSO Charter	1972	Charter	Arabic
Plan for the Development of Education in the Arab Countries	2008	Strategic Plan	Arabic
ALECSO Strategic Plan 2017–2022	2017	Strategic Plan	Arabic
The Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality	2012	Project documents	English
Education Policies and their Role in Achieving SDG 4	2019	Policy Paper	Arabic
Including the Concept of Pan-Arabism and the Arab Dimension in General Education Curricula	2019	Policy Paper	Arabic
Study for Developing and Updating the Organizational Structure of the ALECSO	2014	Policy Paper	Arabic

The use of interviews allows for subjectivity and complexity within human experience. This makes interviews a powerful tool for understanding how the organization defines itself through the analysis of its employees' speech (for research question [a]) (Alvesson 2003). Similar to the document analysis, interview data was also coded within the same identified themes to identify specific terminology relating to Arabism, cultural specificity, global hegemony, and constructivist approaches to policy diffusion. This process allowed for a triangulation of the data to ensure data from different sources is complementary and provides a fuller picture of the situation (Davies, 2001; Thurmond, 2001; Denzin, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell 2016). Triangulation with multiple sources provides "corroboration" of initial findings, as well as "incorporation of additional information" to what one data source provides (Davies, 2001, p. 78). As will be clear in the findings section, data was then grouped into the three main themes that came out most from the reviewed documents. These themes revolve around the dichotomy that the ALECSO faces in identifying its policies, and the pull of two different trends that define it: the Arab cultural narrative and the global dominant agenda.

#### Findings: ALECSO and Arabism and Universalism

The analysis of the documents and interview data revealed an antagonism between two major themes—on the one hand its foundational cultural specificity and its roots in the Arab world, and on the other the

dominant global trends in education that cannot be avoided on any level (whether national, regional, or international).

According to ALECSO's Constitution, the organization's original mandate is to "enable intellectual unity among the Arab world through education, culture and science, and to raise the cultural level so that Arab people are able to participate positively as Global Citizens" (ALECSO, 1972, Charter, Article 1). Since the first article, we find this dichotomy between two roles that the organization has set for itself: encouraging Arab unity and preservation of Arab culture but never forgetting its larger role in a global environment where the organization needs to "extend bridges of dialogue and cooperation between this culture and other cultures in the world" (ALECSO, 1972, Charter ). Entrenched in an ideological framework and based on the cultural backdrop that embraces the ideology of Pan-Arabism and the importance of the Arabic language, and Islamic culture, the ALECSO struggles to position itself within a universalist, globalized arena of education policy making.

Based on the analysis of the different organizational documents as well as the interviews conducted, the ALECSO draws the designs of its policies from three different sources concurrently: a) Arab regional education experts' recommendations, b) national level suggestions from member countries, and c) global guidelines and trends. An example of this process was the development of the "Strategic Plan 2017–2022" based on a set of references and sources from which its main objectives and work priorities were derived, including

- a) The Charter of Arab Cultural Unity and ALECSO Constitution.
  - b) ALECSO strategies and plans, including: The Plan for Developing Education in the Arab world and The project for the advancement of the Arabic language.
  - c) Evaluations of previous plans.
  - d) The best Arab and international experiences in the fields of the organization's work.
  - e) Member states' opinions and the orientations of their national committees
- (ALECSO, 2017)

The ALECSO bases its policies on various sources, many of them Arab, as the ideological foundation of the organization demands, but also always on international resources. This is clear from the very strong partnerships between the ALECSO and other organizations; the ICESCO (Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS), the UNESCO and the WB; "ALECSO works in an Arab context, in a regional context

and in a global context, meaning all of these organizations work in the framework of an international alliance” (interviewee 1, 2021).

This appears to have led to a slight identity crisis within the priorities of the organization. This crisis is specifically mentioned in “Including the Concept of Pan-Arabism and the Arab Dimension in General Education Curricula” (El Harby, 2019, p. 9):

The dangerous situations that our region is going through, in which the Arab land has become permissible, Arab energies and resources are dissipated, and with them the Arab identity, where the Arab sense of belonging and Arab culture are receding.

### Preservation of Arab Culture and Identity

In order to ascertain what is meant by “Arab identity,” I use the definition of “identity” as defined by ALECSO in “Including the Concept of Pan-Arabism and the Arab Dimension in General Education Curricula” (El Harby, 2019, p. 12)

Identity means a strong awareness and feeling of the individual towards his family, his homeland and his nation. Identity is part of the individual’s concept of himself, and stems from his perception that he is a member of a group bound by a territory as well as by cultural, value-laden and sentimental factors that shape his relationship to this group.

What defines Arab identity is the Islamic religion, a biological sense of identity wherein Arabs are one race, a geographical closeness, a common history and culture and, most importantly, the Arabic language (ALECSO, 2019). This gives us a clear idea of the foundational narrative that the organization is based on and how it defines the ideology that explains its existence. This emphasis on Arabization and the importance of the Arabic language as a common factor between these nations is clearly stressed by the number of times the terms “Arab,” “preservation,” “culture,” “pan-Arabism,” “Arabic,” “Arabization,” etc., are mentioned in every single ALECSO publication, which are evidently the core values promoted by the organization. In a document entitled *ALECSO Activities in the Field of Translation*, the author explains that “the term ‘national’ (*qawmiyy*) is often used in Arab documents in the sense of ‘Pan-Arab.’ The Arabs regard themselves as one ‘nation’” (ALECSO, 1986, p. 188).

Through the analysis of the documents, it is easy to note an obvious Pan-Arab stance taken by the ALECSO, glorifying aspects of Arabization while subtly rejecting aspects of Westernization. The *Education Policy and Its Role in Achieving SDG 4* (El Harby, 2019) document emphasizes the efforts of Arab countries in the field of education planning. This planning

was originally based on getting rid of the effects of colonialism and, at the same time, seeking to advance and modernize. The author admits that there were some challenges that hindered the improvement of educational systems in the region,

especially in countries that were suffering from economic crises or where colonialism permeated their cultural and intellectual structure in an influential manner, which required them to strive harder to uproot the influence of colonialism from the roots it had extended over decades in the heart of the Arab land. (El Harby, 2019, p. 11)

This rejection of neocolonialism and neo-imperialism is a constant in most reviewed documents:

How long will we be satisfied with the fact that our schools' performance is lower than that achieved in countries with which we are in a fierce competition in order to break the restrictions of "dependency," liberate the initiative and control our destiny? (ALECSO, 2009, p. 11)

Another area where the theme of preservation is clear is through the recommendations provided by the different documents, which often include "using the available Arab expertise, because it is better able to understand the Arab complex culture" (El Harby, 2019, p. 66). Focused on "the process of building Arab identity and citizenship" and being part of a "global village" while maintaining the integrity of "traditional Arab, values" (El Harby, 2019, p. 39). The strategic plan clearly states that the policies needed for "fixing" the Arab educational systems must emanate from an Arab dialogue in the framework of the common Arab development work and cannot be imposed from the outside, by foreign powers (ALECSO, 2009) and Arab educational decision-makers need to make use of the existing "large reservoir of experiences and innovations by adopting other countries' successful experiences, provided that these experiences are adapted to—and made to comply with—the specificities of the Arab countries" (ALECSO, 2008, p. 14).

The focus remains on the importance of the Arabic language as the main common aspect between the member states, the dream to unite based on this common aspect, and the struggle to protect it against Western influence and the hegemony of foreign languages in the region (English and French especially). For instance, according to a former ALECSO Chief of Staff interviewed for this research, the Project for the Advancement of the Arabic Language was among the projects that the ALECSO spent large sums of money on and mobilized all their resources for, and the countries were very enthusiastic about (interviewee 2, 2021). Similarly, the Arabization of Higher Education policy initiative,

which emanated as far back as the 1980s and was put forward again more recently as part of the “Plan for the Development of Education in the Arab World” (2008), can be explained by the foundational narrative of the ALECSO:

As an organization, it is governed by certain controls, the most important of these controls is the Arabism of the organization, it is an Arab organization and one of its fundamentals is that it glorifies and promotes the Arabic language and Arab culture, and of course because of the association of Arab culture with Islamic culture. (interviewee 2, 2021)

And Arabic is the revered language of the Qur’an, which glorifies the language even more.

In order to better understand the organizational thinking, one must always remember that from its foundation the ALECSO wanted to portray itself as an Arab “house of expertise,” a sort of think tank that develops regional policies for education, culture, and scientific research and that Arab countries can turn to in order to get feedback and advice for their own policies. The most recent and most prominent representation of this is the “Strategic Plan for the Development of Education in the Arab World” developed in 2008. It is, as described by ALECSO, a frame of reference and strategic guideline for the different countries to work towards; each individual state, as well as through organizations such as the ALECSO, should develop projects that contribute to the achievement of this overall strategic plan (ALECSO, 2008). In order to produce such strategies, the ALECSO’s agenda setting process is based on recommendations from regional experts and national level suggestions from ministries of education, culture, scientific research, etc., as they are the ones who know their own conditions better than anyone. This explains for instance how the ALECSO can go against global trends in education related to the internationalization and globalization of education, as well as the prevalence of the English language as a medium of teaching in order to be up-to-date with innovations, and promote policies that revolve strongly around Arabization. And even though the ALECSO’s policies are inspired by guidelines from global IOs as well, such as the use of ICT and modernization of education, for example, still it does so in order to achieve the goals set by the ALECSO; the promotion of the Arabic language for instance (Jemni & Khribi, 2016), as it remains the *raison d’être* of the ALECSO (interviewee 2, 2021).

### the Pull of global/universal values

On the other hand, we find a strong presence of global values within the ALECSO, which sometimes seem to be, if not contradictory, then in tension with the stated purpose of the organization. Starting from its name and founded around the same time, the ALECSO is seen as an emulation of the UNESCO; it is often called the Arab UNESCO (Pinfari, 2009; interviewee 2, 2021). Sharing similar aims and purposes of cooperation in education, science, and culture, focusing on the same three areas of work, “to advance the ideal of equality of educational opportunity without regard to race, sex or any distinctions, economic or social” (UNESCO, 1945). Both organizations even share quite a similar structure, with a General Conference, an Executive Board, and a Secretariat. And although the UNESCO focuses on more international, universalist values such as peace, freedom of expression, cultural diversity, and human rights, whereas the ALECSO has a foundational narrative that is more culturally specific, their drivers are more often than not the same. They are strong allies according to the reviewed documents and the interviews conducted (UNESCO, 2015; ALECSO 2016; interviewee 1, 2021). And as actors within the education global arena, they are both heavily focused on achieving the UN’s common goals defined by SDG 4 for the improvement of education quality.

It becomes clear through the analysis than even if the ALECSO defines itself as an inherently Arab organization, it cannot work outside the realm of global structures and guidelines, of which the SDGs are an example. According to interviewee 1, a project coordinator at the ALECSO, “The ALECSO works in an Arab context, in a regional context and in a global context” which is obvious in all their publications (ALECSO, 2008; ALECSO, 2012; Jemni & Khribi, 2016; El Harby, 2019):

According to ALECSO vision and plan for the development of education in the Arab region, the effective use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education is considered as a primary avenue allowing to reach not only the objectives of enhancing education and its quality, but also to reach the Sustainable Development Goals SDGs in the long run. (Jemni & Khribi, 2016, p. 89)

The theme of global values is most obvious in the ALECSO document developed specifically to highlight how Arab countries can improve their education policies in order to achieve SDG 4, which is used as a main guide for developing education policy (“Education Policies and Their Role in Achieving SDG4” (El Harby, 2019). Suggestions from this publication include national constitutional amendments to put forward

the role of education and assert the role of the state as the main provider of education services for everyone equally. Identifying the philosophy of education for states, the cultural and sociological components that define it (such as the national and regional identity, human rights principals, international agreements, etc.). It can be noted from this publication how both regional and global aspects are omnipresent in their agenda setting and the definition of their policies. The document relies heavily on examples and cases from the OECD that are identified as “international best practices” (2015).

The analysis also reveals that despite a general rejection of Western values and of imposing foreign ideas on Arab countries within all ALECSO publications, the organization cannot help but define educational quality and achievement according to global criteria. We see this in the ALECSO’s main policy document, the “Strategic Plan for the Development of Education in the Arab World,” where the text also allows for “using successful experiences from different countries, only if contextualized and adapted to suit the specificities of the Arab regional context,” and that the Arab world should be open to international efforts and to successful practices in order to adapt them to the local context and benefit from them (ALECSO, 2008). As the main strategic document relating to education that was developed by the organization, complete with implementation and a monitoring and evaluation plans, it is a high-level policy document that attempts to incorporate guidelines that would be beneficial for member states, despite their differing educational situations. It does demonstrate, however, an unusual approach wherein it lacks important figures and statistics; while some are mentioned, they are very few and one cannot help wonder on what bases this document has been drawn. And this is not the only publication where this is the case; in “Promoting Effective Use of ICT” (ALECSO, 2014), even when reporting on a survey, there are no figures or statistics to support the results. This might not necessarily reflect a weakness on its part, but only goes further to prove the reality that Western institutions now have the upper hand in establishing, evaluating, and measuring such standards (Morgan, 2017); according to the ALECSO’s Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality-ARAEIQ project:

Arab education systems are facing major challenges regarding quality of learning outcomes, as illustrated by the low scores of Arab students in the International Assessments of Educational Attainment (PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS . . . ) and the low number of Arab universities enlisted in the Top 500 of the “Academic Ranking of World Universities” in 2013. (ALECSO, 2012, p. 3)

This is basically how global organizations maintain their stronger position on an international as well as regional and national level, “by drawing on the results of these international student assessments as the only measure of educational quality, the World Bank creates a space for governing education in the Arab region” (Morgan, 2017, p. 506). This is quite in line with the World Bank’s vision of becoming a knowledge bank (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Anwaruddin, 2014).

It can be interpreted that while both the global and the regional organizations pretend to work in collaboration for a common purpose as equals, in reality it is not the case. There is an unequal power relation, and the weaker organization cannot work without the stronger one. For example, in the UNESCO-ALECSO partnership agreement document (ALECSO & UNESCO, 2016), there is a note stipulating that the document is drafted and signed in both French and Arabic, but in case of discrepancy, the French document takes precedent, proving this unequal power dynamic. From the analysis of the reviewed documents and the interviews, the ALECSO upholds a certain narrative, which is most obvious in interview 1 with a current member of the organization, that helps it sustain an apparent autonomy and importance. But seeing the lack of recognition it gets both in the literature and in practice within the region, one wonders whether it has *de facto* power. This will be explored further in the next section to identify which of the two trends is more powerful within the organization; is it clinging to cultural ideology or succumbing to (unspoken) global pressures?

where does the balance lie?

As described in the previous sections, ALECSO policy makers are simultaneously faced with two competing trends in order to design and implement reform initiatives, which led to a series of somewhat confused and inconsistent strategies promoted by the organization trying to satisfy different stakeholders. And although the question of which pull factor is more influential cannot be answered through this research alone, I would like to propose a potential analysis that could explain the ALECSO’s current lack of contribution to education policy making.

Firstly, there is a decline in the role of specialized Arab organizations including ALECSO, which does not necessarily emanate from outside pressures; “their failure to convince Arabs of their competency and effectiveness is no secret” (Abdel Azim, 2014, p. 7). Other reasons have been identified through the analysis that could better explain this waning of the ALECSO’s role, among them three seem to be more dominant: (a) HR and staffing strategies, (b) strong feeling of sovereignty in Arab states, and



(c) lack of funding, leading to an overall decline in the effectiveness of the organization to implement its projects.

According to a survey conducted in 2014 by ALECSO, the organization had a total 199 employees. The most shocking statistic that was found through this survey was that out of the 199 employees, only 22% had post-graduate certification including master's degrees and PhDs, while 43% held only basic degrees (high school graduates).

And if we dig deeper into the analysis, we will find that the Education Department, which is one of the pivotal departments with a number of strategic vital projects, such as the Strategy for the Development of Education in the Arab World and Adult Education, we find that it includes only four employees who have post-university degrees in educational fields. (Abdel Azim, 2014, pp. 22–23)

What we can note from this is how an organization such as the ALECSO intends to emulate global organizations without really thinking about the causes of success of these leading IOs. The ALECSO's primary role emanating from its Constitution is to be a "house of expertise," to which states turn to learn how to implement the policies they adopt (ALECSO Charter 1945), and "this role has completely collapsed in the ALECSO due to employment policies" (interviewee 2, 2021). And as this lack of competencies increased, so did the lack of trust from states to consider it an "expert," as ALECSO did not possess the necessary capabilities to advise countries, so its role became diplomatic coordination between countries (interviewee 1, 2021) instead of making efficient contributions to educational reform in the region.

This leads to the following issue with policy diffusion across states, which is the problem of sovereignty and top-down policy making. "Decision makers do not take ALECSO seriously" (interviewee 2, 2021), and therefore the organization cannot play the role that it originally intended. And even if no organization's suggestions are binding, even the strongest among them, there is definitely more trust in the global organizations. This is mainly due to the quality of input received from them and the level of expertise that is much higher in these organizations, bringing us back to the issue of human resources (Abdel Azim, 2014). Thus, thinking back on Finnemore's theory about how IOs "exercise power autonomously in ways unintended and unanticipated by states at their creation" (1993), it can safely be said that for the specific example of the ALECSO, the organization is unable to transcend the interests of its member states in order to promote policies that could benefit the region. This is especially true of the more powerful states in the region such as Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia, who also happen to be the largest financial contributors. The issue

around sovereignty is of particular interest in the studied region as Arab countries have a particular politico-economic situation, non-democratic regimes, and this greatly affects decision-making and policy making (Barnett 1995). Therefore, the role of Arab organizations is compromised by their situation.

The third contributing factor is financing, which appears as a major theme within the analysis, wherein a vicious cycle of lack of competence on the organization's side, leading to a lack of trust from states, provoking them to abstain from contributing to the ALECSO's budget and therefore the organization lacking resources to finance its projects, leading to more inefficiencies, etc.

Partnerships were therefore drawn up as a solution to some of the organization's setbacks: avoiding the issue of dependency by soliciting partnerships and cooperation with different organizations on the global and regional levels:

ALECSO does not work in isolation, the organization works in an Arab alliance with organizations of the common Arab world, such as the Women's Organization, the Arab Labor Organization and other organizations under the umbrella of the League of Arab States and on the regional and international level with the UNESCO (interviewee 1, 2021).

Based on the document analysis (ALECSO, 2008, 2014, 2016; ALECSO & UNESCO, 2016), the largest global partners of the ALECSO are the UNESCO and the WB, while on the regional arena it is the ICESCO, with whom the ALECSO works very closely. This arrangement makes them more or less independent from foreign intervention, unlike for instance when working on WB funded projects. It is worth reminding here that partnerships with global IOs reflect a somewhat unequal power dynamic as seen in the ALECSO-UNESCO partnership agreement where the French version is the master document (ALECSO & UNESCO, 2016).

Because although the influence of global IOs is not the main pressure point according to the analysis, it is impossible to ignore its existence. The main WB funded project that the ALECSO attempted to implement in recent times is the ARAIEQ project. According to Morgan (2017), problem-solving approaches such as the ones offered by this project promoted globalized versions of what "quality education" means, and the criteria against which the different nation states are measured, remaining blind to context and complexity, which is not a fair measurement. Implied in the ARAIEQ was the idea that regional educational policies correspond to national ones and that what is understood at the regional level will be automatically transferred to the national level. But that was not the case,

and as interviewee 2 explained, ARAIEQ did not have sufficient support and commitment from ministries of education to be upheld on a national level. Context is important here; Arab states have adopted neo-liberal policies in the 1990s and 2000s to comply with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and WB regulations and Structural Adjustment Programs, leading to a decrease in public spending and consequently an erosion of public education across the region, leaving space for private actors to enter the market and provide educational services, leading to all types of inequalities and inefficiencies in the system, rather than improvements. Existing in a world led by the IMF and the WB, “the theoretical bases which underlay the work of ALECSO are strongly influenced by the work of economists” (Osman, 1981). According to Morgan (2017), it is global norms that win because policies are not rooted in local contexts and conditions.

ARAIEQ’s solutions to improving educational quality in the form of measurement tools for student learning outcomes and teacher quality are decontextualised from the on-the-ground political, economic and social conditions in which teaching and learning in the Arab region take place. (Morgan, 2017, p. 507).

Her analysis and primary data collection suggest that more pressing issues need to be dealt with in order to improve education in the region, including

[t]he state of the political economy in the countries and specific barriers to educational quality [. . .] including teachers’ poor working conditions and low wages, inequalities of opportunities and lack of resources and the politics of educational reform.

ARAIEQ follows the WB’s SABER approach and framework focused on teacher training and development without addressing the core problem of improving teachers’ wages and working conditions. The framework also failed to address the issues of inequality and unequitable access to education based on geographical area and social class, which are the two main causes of educational inequality (Boughazala & Hamdi, 2014; Herrera & Torres, 2006).

## Conclusion

Through the research and analysis of findings, it was found that the ALECSO is caught in between two trends that pull it in different directions, hindering its policy-making process and its prescribed role of advancing educational reform in the region. It relies on three main sources for its agenda setting: regional experts, national recommendations, and global guidelines. And instead of benefiting from its strategic position between the global and the local and utilizing resources optimally in order to strike a balance between the needs of states and the existing knowledge outside

of the region, the ALECSO is left drifting between these sometimes opposing trends. The organization tries through its policy documents and publications to prove that it is only concerned with the interests of its member states, focusing on policies of promotion and preservation of Arab culture and especially the Arabic language. This idea is often paired with a rejection of foreign values, and outside intervention in Arab affairs, creating an impression of opposition. The promotion of a Pan-Arab identity through the advancement of joint Arab action and the increased use of the Arabic language in education, science, and research is at the core of the organization, further pushing the agenda of a continuation of the Pan-Arab movement. The research has shown that there is a definite struggle within the organization to select the most relevant policies in a regional context, while having to keep up with global trends. There is surely a mix of both, but I cannot vouch for the righteousness of the choices.

Regarding its relation to global IOs, they may seem equal at a first glance through ALECSO's own documents and publications where the UNESCO and the WB are portrayed as partners. However, if we dig a little deeper we can find that these IOs tend to hold the funding for ALECSO's largest projects and the ALECSO is often unable to follow up with activities once the funding ends. Although it seems like they are able to hire outside expertise to support them in designing policies and strategies, this is often the end of the road, and the implementation step is not taken up by individual states, creating an array of unused guidelines and policies. This may very much be an issue of funding, compounded by a long-standing lack of trust in the organization as opposed to other more established IOs, leading to a limited power over educational reform in the Arab region.

However, while the ALECSO presents a culturally specific ideological stance, one cannot ignore the many aspects in which it emulates global IOs. It is clear from the choice of the organization's name closely imitating the UNESCO, its sharing areas of focus and an organizational structure, all the way to the use of WB guidelines and criteria to measure educational quality. Based on the analysis of the reviewed documents and interviews, it can be concluded that the ALECSO is struggling to establish a strong position for itself within the region. Several other players seem to have more power and influence on the policy-making process, including leading global IOs, but also national governments that do not accept outside intervention from the ALECSO, although they might potentially accept it from other actors. The role of the ALECSO then ends up being more

coordinative rather than the intended “house of expertise” that aims to improve education policy making in the region. Although the organization continues to strive for a more pronounced role through developing strategies to advance education systems in the region and hiring experts to create implementation and monitoring plans for their activities, this role is often undermined by the lack of competencies within the organization, the strong sense of sovereignty among Arab states who do not easily accept outside intervention, even if it is from an organization that represents them, and finally due to a vicious cycle of lack of trust leading to lack of funding. The role of the ALECSO in the global policy diffusion process is therefore often bypassed, wherein global IOs have more influence on this postcolonial region than an organization that is supposed to preserve the Arab and Islamic culture and protect it from foreign hegemony.

According to the findings, it can also be said that, contrary to expectation, IOs are not necessarily teachers of Western norms, but can be teachers of norms of the more powerful, on any level. Taking the example of the ALECSO, which endeavors to counter Western hegemony, in sometimes misguided ways, it can be noted that the stronger, bigger contributors within its member states tend to have more say in the organizations’ politics. As opposed to what Barnett and Finnemore (1999) postulate about the changing role of IOs and how many of them become autonomous of nation-states, the ALECSO ends up not really transcending the interests of its member states but remains quite restrained by them and especially the more powerful ones, going back to the idea of sovereignty.

Although this research is based on a one-case study, we can still make some generalizations about the broader classification of regional organizations (Flyvbjerg 2006). These organizations are strategically positioned between the global and the national levels, and their role can potentially be very important in adapting and contextualizing policies before they are implemented instinctively by governments, that is, if they have the necessary resources. Therefore, the case study of the ALECSO shows that as of yet, it has not reached its full potential in achieving a supportive role for education systems in the region. Morgan (2017) identifies three broad constraints to policy travel between the global and the national: (a) poor working conditions and low wages of teachers in the receiving countries; (b) inequalities and lack of resources to implement the proposed policies; and (c) the existing politics of educational reform in this specific context. The ALECSO could potentially play a role in resolving some of these issues and supporting governments in taking what is needed from global policies and adapting it to their contexts, which the ALECSO is more familiar with.

As one of the main limitations of this study has been the lack of documents available online and the unfortunate circumstances of the pandemic that did not allow anyone to travel, fieldwork was somewhat limited. There is therefore a strong need for more research to be conducted on specific regional organizations in order to understand the full picture of the situation on a regional level. There is also a great need for more research regarding non-democratic systems. As hinted at throughout the article, Western, global, leading research and policies have been dominating the narrative for the recent past (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004; Olaniran, 2008; Shahjahan 2016). And as such, there is a specific focus on areas of concern to the West, including democratic systems and the policy transfer processes that occur within them. On the other hand, in Arab countries with non-democratic systems, where the issue of sovereignty is key and the policy transfer process can be affected by the politico-economic situation, there is often a lack of research, or biased research is biased in accordance with this dominant narrative (Hickling-Hudson et al., 2004; Ibrahim, 2010; Shahjahan, 2016). There is a deep need for further literature on this aspect, as the current state of the scholarship ignores a large part of the world. And as several postcolonial scholars have argued, the best way to deconstruct postcolonial structures is by localizing research. The research needs to stem from the region itself, whether by local researchers or experts on the region, who create a more context-sensitive understanding of the situation and how this leads to specific patterns of policy diffusion (Crossley & Tikly, 2004; Swadener & Mutua, 2008; Tikly & Bond, 2013).

#### Note

1. ALECSO Charter: member states include Jordan, U.A.E., Bahrain, Tunisia, Algeria, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Comoros, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, and Yemen.
2. Constitution and Charter used interchangeably. Arabic word is the same.

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