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On the need to balance endowments and academic integrity

by Ahmed E. Souaiaia*

The article in *The Atlantic*, [The Emir of NYU](#) (MAR 13, 2013), touched on a very important issue: academic freedom. It came on the heels of the [no-confidence vote](#) NYU's faculty in the college of Arts and Science delivered against the president, John Sexton. President Sexton is renowned for creating satellite research and teaching centers around the world through a strategy he called [The Global Network University](#). Specifically, the article pointed to the full degree-granting campus in Abu Dhabi and to faculty's concerns "about academic freedom, diluting NYU's brand, human rights violations in Abu Dhabi, and discrimination against gay and Israeli students."



The article failed to address the critically important issue of striking a balance between the need for funding higher education and preserving academic and scientific integrity. This problem is not new. Research scholars and institutions in exact sciences faced similar ethical and legal issues since they first took money from pharmaceuticals, agricultural companies involved in GMOs, defense industries, and government security and intelligence agencies.

The current economic conditions are forcing universities to cut programs and raise money. These trends are likely to have an immediate and disproportionate impact on liberal arts and humanities programs; hence the vote from NYU's college of Arts and Science faculty. Moreover, creating liberal arts and social sciences programs in places like the Gulf countries require more scrutiny. After all, the limitations on freedoms, the lack of transparency and shared governance, and the treatment of minorities in those countries are addressed through disciplines within liberal arts and social sciences. For this reason alone, establishing campuses or taking money from governments and private individuals from that region ought to be done with extreme prudence.

The Gulf countries do not operate according to the same rules enjoyed in American institutions (See the [statement about banning a scholar from entering UAE](#)). For instance, early this year, the editor of prominent magazine from one of the Gulf States asked if I could write a short essay predicting that the Arab Spring will reach the Gulf countries. Presumably, another scholar was asked to argue the other point of view. Aware of the restrictions on freedom of expression in that country, I insisted that my article should not be edited. With that understanding in place, I wrote what was in my opinion a restrained 250-word piece (see [article below](#)). A day later, the editor wrote back saying, "thanks very much for your honest and well-written article. However, because of legal constraints [...], we can't publish anything that criticizes the ruling royal family."

If a government is threatened by a staged prediction written by a detached academic more than 6,000 miles away, can this same regime (and the regimes like it) allow a center of critical scholarship to thrive within its territory and in contact with its population? I doubt it. The same concern might apply to endowed chairs in many American universities. Can a scholar, whose position is funded by a prince from Saudi Arabia or the government of Bahrain, for example, provide critical and unbiased research about social and religious issues in one or all those countries or relating to Islam in general? I doubt that, too.

Some of the most apologetic works about Wahhabism came out from institutions and by scholars who received considerable money from the Gulf countries. Even if one were to assume that the holders of endowed chairs funded by princes of the Gulf countries have the integrity to tell scientific

truths, their email signature and titles will always function as an implicit endorsement that polishes the names of the donors. Every time they introduce themselves to an audience they become engaged in gratuitous character rehabilitation and/or public relations endeavor on behalf of regimes and individual donors.

Islamic studies endowments created by ostensibly Muslim individuals and governments are even more suspect from the point of view of Islamic law. According to Islamic ethical practices, charity and gifts, including endowments, are supposed to be given discretely to the extent that when “it is given by the right hand, the left hand would not notice.” In Islamic culture, advertising the name of donors nullifies its rewards.

Endowments are given with a purpose and some time that purpose conflicts with the stated aims and mission of educational institutions. During the past decade alone, enough dubious endowments have been discovered to give administrators and faculty members pause. For instance, after the fall of the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, a formal inquiry uncovered that the London School of Economics had accepted at least £1.5m donation from Saif al-Islam. If receiving money from the son of a dictator was not marring enough, the origin of such money should be: the investigation uncovered that the donations “may have been money paid to the dictator's son as bribes.”

Harvard, the institution that produces the ruling elite for the United States, unashamedly collected money from the Gulf countries, too. In 2004, the Boston Globe [reported](#) that Harvard returned a \$2.5 million from the ruler of the United Arab Emirates. The university returned the money because the donor had ties to “an Arab League think tank with alleged anti-American” views. Apparently, Harvard, which shared with Georgetown University more than \$40 million donation from a Saudi Prince in the last decade alone, refused money from a person who might have connections to an organization that *might* criticize U.S. foreign policies. But Harvard leaders see no harm in taking money from members of the ruling families of the Gulf States, who are known for their wanton abuse of foreign workers, minorities, and women.

Another Ivy League school needed to address its ties to donors who were on the wrong side of history, Brown. The University is now attempting to polish its own image after finding out that it had ties to slave traders. It was revealed recently that “some of the University’s early benefactors were involved in the slave trade.” Specifically, a [report](#) produced by a commission established by the University confirmed that “slave labor was used to construct the oldest building on campus and said many of the university's early benefactors were slave owners.”

The conflict between supporting education and polishing donors’ image is not new. However, now, the need for a new paradigm that could encourage people to give to education without risking academic integrity is paramount. For long, private universities have enjoyed more freedom in terms of restrictions for raising money from private donors. Many state universities are now forced to adapt and administrators are aggressively seeking alternative sources of funding. Research grants and private endowments are two attractive streams of revenues. However, endowments do come with strings attached; some strings are obvious and others are subtle. Balancing the need to raise money and preserve academic integrity is a difficult challenge but it can be overcome if administrators and faculty members work together on drawing up sound policies.

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Referenced article:

Are the Gulf countries in danger of facing an Arab Spring in 2013?

Will the GCC countries face an Arab Spring in 2013? The answer is simple: Yes. In fact, the Spring has already bloomed in the Gulf region. When powerful Emirs are threatened by poets, multibillion dollar militaries are mobilized to crush peaceful protesters, and official muftis find it necessary to issue fatwas prohibiting protest at home while their governments are involved in arming opposition groups elsewhere, I would say the Spring is already in the Gulf.

In the past, the Gulf States' rulers shielded themselves from change by seeking shelter behind world superpowers, and by amassing sophisticated weaponry. At that time, they feared the specter of foreigners invading their lands.

Today, they face a threat that cannot be defeated by international alliances, exclusion walls, arbitrary borders, and Patriot missiles. Some groups of their people are already calling upon them from within to end clan privilege, cruel sectarian and ethnic supremacism, boorish double standards, demeaning gender discrimination, and flagrant disregard to common decency, because these attitudes are an affront to dignity.

The first and second rounds of protest in Tunisia and Egypt tell us—in no uncertain terms—that the Arab Spring is not about economics, democracy, or ideology. It is about reclaiming human dignity and ending fear. It is not about who governs; it is about how they govern. These continued struggles tell us that no context can excuse the abuse of human dignity. Therefore, I am as sure that the people will rise up for dignity in the Gulf region as I am sure that the sun will rise from the east tomorrow.