



مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط  
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

# An Overview on Public Sector Employment/Recruitment Reform in the MENA Region

By Roza Mohammed



## **About**

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# An Overview on Public Sector Employment/Recruitment Reform in the MENA Region

By Roza Mohammed\*

## **Abstract:**

Many countries in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region are going through a transformation in their employment/recruitment and selection practices within the public sector, this has led to reforms in the public sector. In the past decade, the MENA region has survived many socioeconomic and political crises, and due to this, these countries have lagged in coping with contemporary approaches to administer their public-sector employment. The outdated systems in place can no longer cope with the current bloated public service employment system.

Introducing these changes within the employment/recruitment and selection within the MENA region places a threat towards both the governmental and societal institutions. Specifically threatened, are the cultural attachments that are assigned to new graduates that seek to secure a job in the public sector. Currently, most MENA countries cannot afford mass-employment of their citizens, coupled with the aging population within the current workforce has now become a burden to support. To then improve public sector employment and to boost public sector performance, reforms within the employment/recruitment and selection process has been put in place. The reforms lay out the criteria for restructuring the new system, which employs on a basis of merit, required skill, capacity, budget and empowering the private sector as an alternative employment tool for anyone seeking employment. This paper aims to give an overview on the existing reforms in public sector employment in

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the MENA region, the possible challenges and obstacles, while providing some recommendations on the process of adaptation. Specifically, this paper should provide MENA government officials and policy makers with sufficient information for consideration whilst they introduce and implement the reforms within their public employment/recruitment and selection practices.

### **Introduction:**

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries have always been under the global scrutiny due to its strategic position in the world.<sup>1</sup> Different sources classify MENA countries in a variety of ways, however the main the countries are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Qatar, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen. There is an extension to the countries that encounter another group including Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Chad, Comoros, Cyprus, Djibouti, Eritrea, Georgia, Mali, Niger, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Turkey.<sup>2</sup> This long list stays debatable according to numerous sources, and probability is given to how it is perceived in the context.<sup>3,4</sup>

The MENA region has been the hub for turmoil for centuries, and the struggle over the natural resources has been known to be “the backbone of western economies”.<sup>5</sup> The problems range from social to economical, and it is the main cause of instability of the MENA region.<sup>6</sup> The MENA region’s importance is unavoidable, and anything that occurs has a corollary affect in the West. Due to this reason, it has attracted global attention considering

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1. OPEC (2012)
  2. Dumper and Stanley (2007)
  3. UNICEF (2018)
  4. OHCHR (2018)
  5. Shah (2011)
  6. Aboueldahab et. al (2017)

its richness of natural resources, religious extremism and political stances.<sup>7</sup> Since the region is already going through a lot of tribulations, an overall reform is advisable for them as their public service systems no longer meet the demands of the people. Further, the populace is exposed to and aware of modern ways of governance which to sustain stability and progress outside their borders.<sup>8</sup> IMF and Barej<sup>9,10</sup> reported that the MENA region needs reform on all levels to promote growth and learn to diversify their economies through different resources. Additionally, they highlight on job creation through proper employment reform to meet the standards of the proposed growth.

	Projections		
	2016	2017	2018
<b>Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>3.4</b>
Oil exporters	4.0	1.9	2.9
Oil growth	16.3	4.3	6.8
Non-oil growth	0.4	2.9	2.7
Gulf Cooperation Council	2.0	0.9	2.5
Oil growth	2.6	-2.0	2.4
Non-oil growth	1.9	3.0	2.7
Oil importers	3.7	4.0	4.4

Sources: National authorities; and IMF staff calculations and projections.

**Oil exporters:** Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

**Oil Importers:** Afghanistan, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Pakistan, Sudan, and Tunisia.

Note: Data exclude Syrian Arab Republic.

Figure 1: Latest Growth Projections (IMF 2017).

7 .Botelho 2015

8. Human Rights Watch (2018)

9. IMF (2017)

10. Barej (2017)

The MENA region specifically calls for reform in the public sector because quality of services provided by the formal management can lay the ground for a stronger economy, and the region has taken genuine steps towards modernization as an approach for development and economic stability.<sup>11,12</sup> Panchamia and Thomas in their report, pinpoint some factors contributing to any sort of civil service reform, but they especially highlight on the political support for the reform process at all stages. Reforms in general are not an easy task both in public and private sector, and in some MENA countries it is even more difficult due to the political instability. The World Economic Forum formed a committee that included experts from civil, public and private sectors to discuss an effective reform process, and they all agreed to the following seven steps: “Create a clear vision, establish an environment for trust, consult public beforehand and maintain momentum through regular communication, enable an ecosystem for accountability, attract and promote talent, and build foundation for stability”.<sup>13</sup>

### **Why Does MENA Need Reform in the Public Sector?**

The public sector in the MENA region faces scrutiny for disfunction and lack of a proper administration and management. A good governance in place that helps provide adequate public services can form a strong administration through reforms in the public sector.<sup>14</sup> There is a big issue of management in the MENA region, and researchers call for urgent reforms in all governmental institutions because the current systems in place can no longer cope with modern developments. Due to this reason, reforms are required to meet the local, regional and global modernized management styles to be able to provide quality services for Middle Eastern societies.<sup>15</sup> Here, management plays the main role as it determines

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11. OECD (2010)

12. Panchamia and Thomas (2014)

13. World Economic Forum (2017)

14. Dixon, Bhuiyan and Ustuner (2018)

15. Shubber (2016)

the success of an organization, and a good management team will utilize all resources to provide the best service and output<sup>16,17</sup>. A public sector specialist, demonstrated in a report to the World Bank that initiatives towards public sector reforms are crucial because the region went through extensive transformations from creating new states from former regimes and empires to E-Governance and modern management styles<sup>18</sup>. The MENA region needs structural reforms from scratch and short term plans no longer serve their progression. This means countries within MENA should grasp the opportunities coming along initiate the seeds of reform.<sup>19</sup> There are efforts toward structural reforms on all levels in the public sector in MENA countries, but the development and pace vary from one country to another due to microeconomic and political instabilities<sup>20</sup>. Bangura and Larbi demonstrate with case studies that the implemented reforms show positive results within the public sector, and the era of globalization require these countries to catch up and remain oriented towards the future through reforms in public administration.<sup>21</sup>

## **Public Sector Employment/Recruitment Reform in the MENA Region**

Public sector employment reform is one aspect of human resource management (HRM), and it is included and considered as an important part of the overall public-sector reform taking place in the MENA region.<sup>22</sup> Any sort of reforms undertaken by any government will fail if the HRM component of those reforms are not encountered because HRM is at the heart of the desired change. Since HRM deals with people, and reforms

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16. Ibid

17. USAID (2013)

18. Beschel Jr. (2007)

19. World Bank (2014)

20. El-Erian et al. (1996)

21. Bangura and Larbi (2006)

22. Common (2011)

are about the acquisition of skills and new ways of dealing with problems, the human aspect of the reform is in control of the outcome.<sup>23</sup> The figure below demonstrates the initiatives and efforts in the MENA region towards genuine reforms in the field of HRM starting with imbedding strategic planning, performance-oriented systems and rules, and flexible working systems. If these derived from the former problems that the region faced, it is optimistic that there will be solutions for the employment crisis in the region.<sup>24</sup>

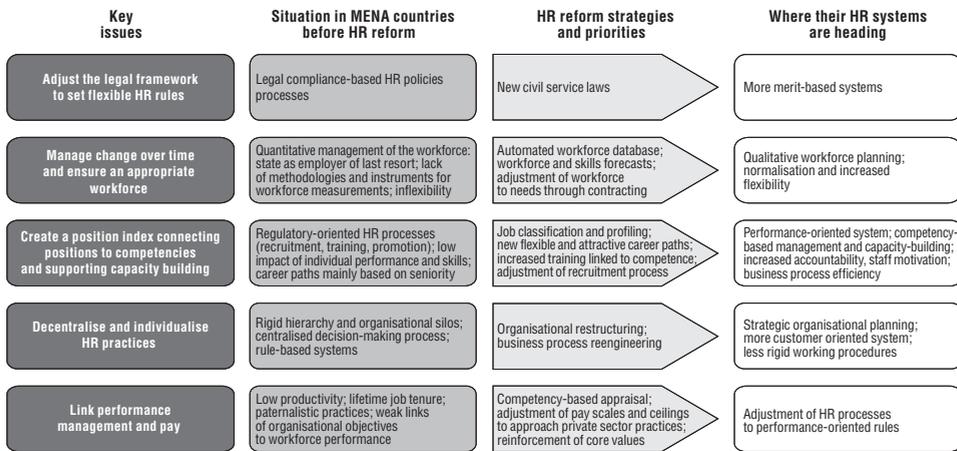


Figure 2: Problems within the HRM in the MENA region that need reform (OECD 2010).

When it comes to employment reform, it is considered to be the most important and least reviewed type of reforms. Currently, there are initiatives to look into employment reforms, and strategic approaches that need to be undertaken because of its complexity.<sup>25</sup> Organizing a well-structured and put together workforce should be the government’s main priority to be able to provide and project the need of people to be able to present good

23. HRM Guide (2011)

24. OECD (2010)

25. McCourt (2010)

services. In order for public sector reform to be successful, governments should consider a less hierarchical model which can be the hub for new approaches and bring in new technologies in proportion with human resources.<sup>26</sup> There are a lot in the MENA region that employment reform can cover like adequate job creation, reducing the bloated employment and looking at labor regulation, and for these to be changed strategic approaches and reforms should be considered through choosing the best practices in the world.<sup>27</sup> Different countries of the MENA region suffer with different types of dilemmas, but the most commonly referenced is the crowded public/formal employment sector. Statistics show the public employment rate in Tunisia is 22%, Syria, Jordan and Egypt.<sup>28</sup> While in Iraq, among 8.5 million adults are eligible to work. Of that population, 6 million are employed by the state, which constitutes 70% of the working population.<sup>29,30</sup>

### **Various Employment Reforms in MENA Countries:**

This section will look at different MENA countries that went under public employment reforms or that need them. All countries are in need to look back at their public administration, specifically with employment. Researchers and commentators constantly argue that reforms in the MENA region seem to have a slow pace due to political and social instability and “the natural resources curse”, otherwise the MENA region has all the substantive elements of human and physical resources.<sup>31,32,33,34</sup>

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26. Hitchcock, Laycock and Sundorph (2017)

27. Angel-Urdinola and Kuddo (2010)

28. O’Sullivan, Rey and Mendez (2011)

29. USAID (2013)

30. Shubber (2016)

31. Ibid

32. Angel-Urdinola and Kuddo (2010)

33. Yusuf (2004)

34. Auty (2001)

## 1. Egypt

Egypt, as one of the large and populated states of the MENA region, and Egypt is considered as resource poor state.<sup>35</sup> Unemployment is one of the major issues in Egypt among the young, and the recent political instability caused by the Arab Spring have exacerbated the problem.<sup>36</sup>

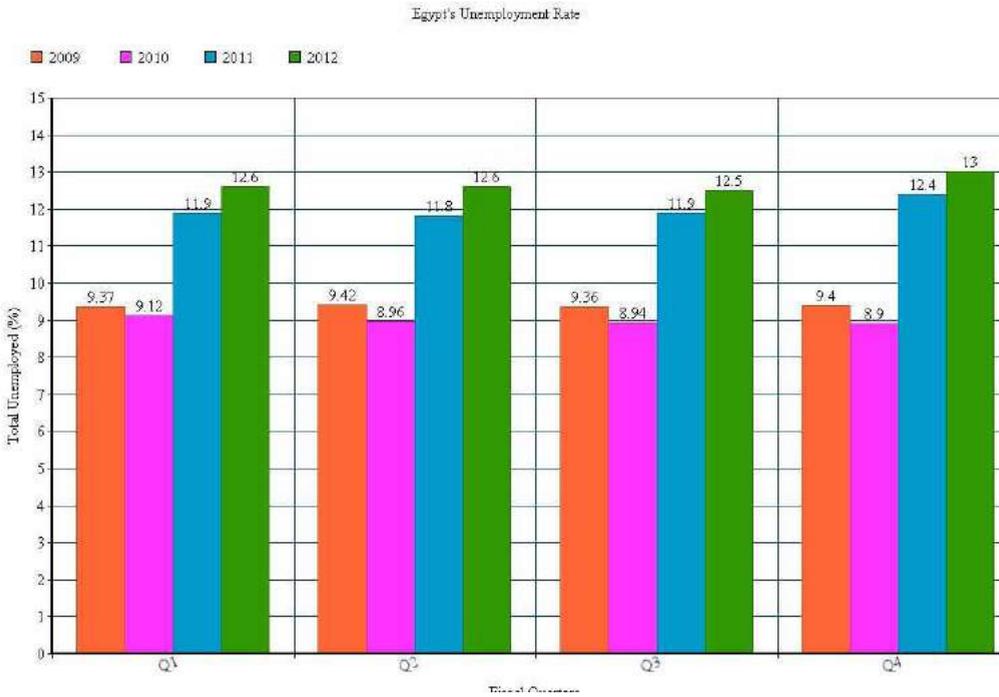


Figure 3: Egypt's Unemployment Rate (Rebel Economy 2013).

Halime <sup>37</sup> states there is large scale unemployment in Egypt that led to losing a million jobs specifically in 2011; equally the labor force is growing. These co-actively add to the unemployment rate. The Arab Spring brought

35. World Bank (2007)

36. Gaballa (2017)

37. Halime (2013)

socio-economic instability and statistics show 12.8% unemployment. It is worth considering that this unemployment is affecting youth mostly, and it shows 30% of young people aged 15–29 are unemployed.<sup>38</sup>

The sad situation is that unemployment is affecting the educated population severely, and the ultimate reform should encounter the talent pool according to the availability in the market.<sup>39,40</sup> Ghafar<sup>41</sup> in his next article referred to youth as “a ticking bomb”, and he clarifies that youth unemployment in Egypt is dragging the country into greater instability and another possible uprising. The future consequences for the unemployment of Egyptian youth remains unstable, and as a result, this frustration will impede the youth into not using their energy as productive individuals with social value.<sup>42</sup>

Even though Egypt has a large educated youth population, there is a gap between the educated system and the skills required for a job attainment, and the proposed reform should combine both together.<sup>43</sup> Further, Egypt is facing the lack of research and development (R&D) in all the fields, and there is less of a 1% in the national budget allocated towards R&D. Also, Egypt is only spending 1% on higher education that does not serve the education system at all. This budget merely goes towards salaries and other expenditures not research or educational programs.<sup>44</sup> The Egyptian government is then perceived as shortsighted in dissolving this problem, and incapable in rendering approaches to overcome youth unemployment. The fact that the government does not have a strong strategy towards job creation alongside with bad management and corruption, sets an inept

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38. Ghafar (2016)

39. Ibid

40. Galal (2002)

41. Ghafar (2016)

42. Young (2014)

43. Helmi (2017)

44. El-Behary (2016)

platform for free trade, investment and competitiveness.<sup>45</sup>

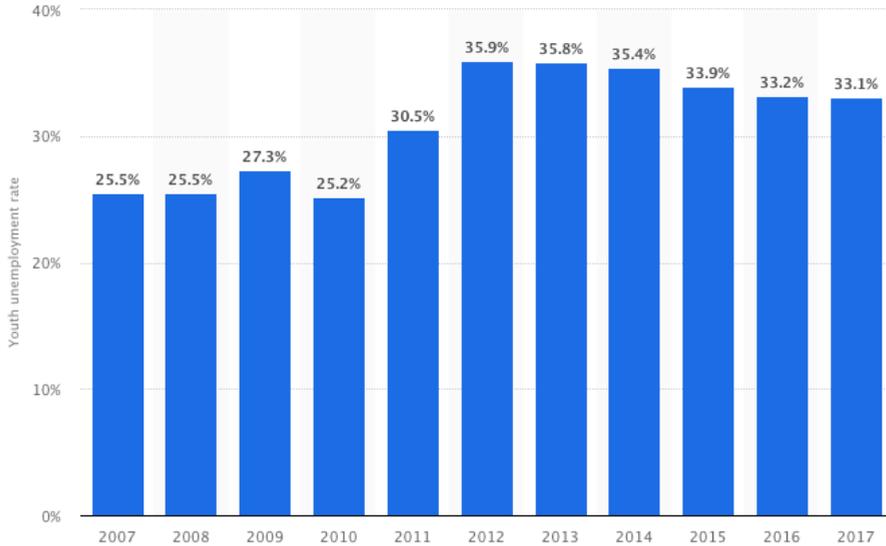


Figure 4: Youth Unemployment Rate in Egypt 2007–2017 (Statista 2018).

## 2. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the next country in the MENA that is facing problems regarding public sector employment, and for the Saudi Arabia the most emphasized upon is women unemployment.<sup>46</sup> According to Bayanat Economic Source<sup>47</sup>, Saudi Arabia has the lowest women participation rate in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) compared to its counterpart countries. Despite the low women participation rate in the labor marker, women still prefer to join public sector than private due to job security and benefits of the formal employment.<sup>48</sup>

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45. Said (2015)

46. PwC (2010)

47. Bayanat Economic Source (2017)

48. Alfarran (2016)

In contrast, Toumi<sup>49</sup> states that 39% of the Saudi Arabia’s public employees are women, and he supports the government approaches in creating jobs for the local educated women after reports were published on high unemployment rate of women in the country. Other data show that currently women constitute 22% of the workforce in Saudi Arabia, and the government started reform acts in that regard. Lately, Saudi Arabia has been promoting mix gender work environments that were not permitted in the past; this addition to the labor market creates diverse skills and talents.<sup>50</sup>

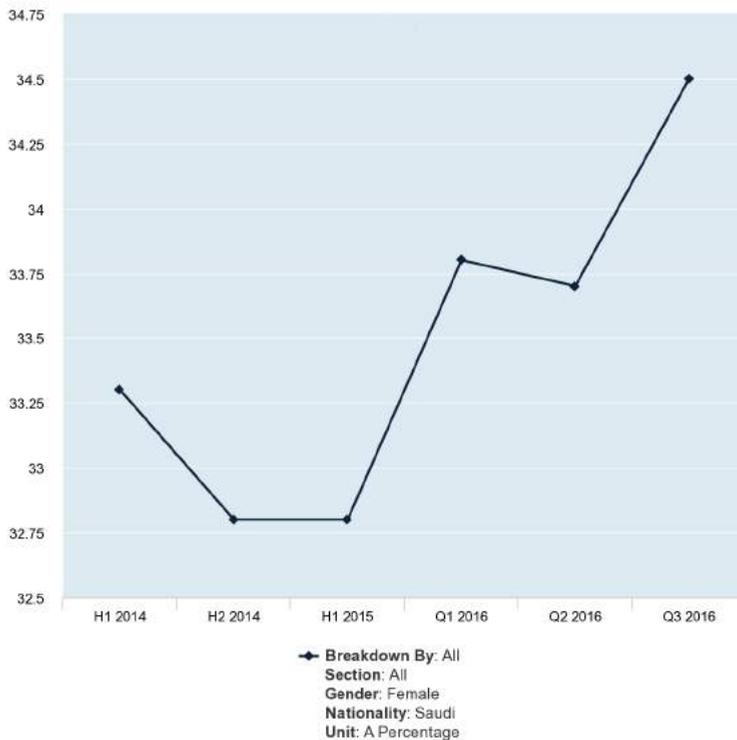


Figure 5: Women Unemployment Rate in Saudi Arabia (General Authority for Statistics: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2018).

49. Toumi (2014)

50. Hassan (2018)



Figure 6: Saudi Employment Rate by Sector (Ministry of Labor and Social Development: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2016)

Reports from the ministry of labor and social development of Saudi Arabia<sup>51</sup> shows that two third of the working population is employed by the public sector, and among them women enjoying the prestige, benefit and security of public sector employment. Until the third quarter of 2016 in Saudi Arabia, a total of 34.5% Saudi national women were not employed.<sup>52</sup>

At present, Saudi women face great social and cultural obstacles to enter the workforce including certain rules that do not permit women’s interaction with their counterpart, and some employers still acquire the women employees to bring their husband/family’s consent to be able to start a job.<sup>53</sup> The rights granted to women in Saudi Arabia are not remotely close to equality, and numerous obstacles ranging from legal to social, educational to occupational, and cultural to economics are preventing women to take part in the country’s economic development.<sup>54</sup> Saudi Arabia came up with a strategic reform plan called the “Vision 2030”, and this vision encounters to maximize women participation in the labor market to its highest rate possible.<sup>55</sup> According to vision 2030, the Saudi government plans to pull down unemployment to 9% by 2020, and this strategic plan is threatening the government as it means creating more jobs for women and youth while the data shows the opposite.<sup>56</sup>

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51. Ministry of Labor and Social Development of Saudi Arabia (2016)

52. General Authority for Statistics: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2018)

53. Mark (2017)

54. Rajkhan (2014)

55. Naseem and Dhruva (2017)

56. Dudley (2016)

## How a Healthy Reform in the Public Sector Can be Carried on?

Throughout the globe all countries and governments are facing almost similar challenges, and most of the time operating on a tight budget is the case. In return, people still expect sufficient services. Some principles of successful public-sector reform are proposed by Maude<sup>57</sup>: openness and transparency of the government, control over common activities, loose control over operation and stepping out from monopolies, digitalizing the systems for efficiency, and innovation towards new ways of operating. The MENA countries were not sincere enough and reluctant towards reforms in the public sector, and reforms are expensive. Most MENA countries are affected by the drop in oil prices, and this has affected the foreign aid allocated for them, resulting in an observable drop in foreign investment.<sup>58</sup>

Reform approaches should be taken seriously and identifying the reform's objectives play a major role throughout the process, and it is also crucial to understand that a reform is a gradual process.<sup>59</sup> The most adequate and common type of reform carried on by countries are through downsizing and performance management.<sup>60</sup> The aim of any sort of public sector reform should be for delivering a better service, a more transparent government, empowering the private sector, strategic management, decentralization within the organs of the governmental institutions, in concert with efficiency and at a low cost.<sup>61</sup> Chandarasorn<sup>62</sup> writes down thirteen points that he thinks can contribute to the success of a reform plan regarding adaptation and implementation: what the reform captures, how long does it take, political support, stability, aims and objectives of the reform, sticking to the plan, methods of the reform, resources, monitoring and evaluation of the process, piloting the reform, looking at former

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57. Maude (2014)

58. World Bank (2003)

59. Shubber (2016)

60. De Vries and Nemeč (2013)

61. Sida (2013)

62. Chandarasorn (1997)

experiences, and finally having a solid public sector reform policy.

The word reform on its own is a strong word as it refers to altering the existing systems that has been in place for a long time, and its literal meaning is “reorganizing” or “restructuring”. On the contrary, reform should be thought about as second chance to improve what is presently held, and rather than as a scary act, it is a purpose of innovation and improvement that should not be taken for granted.<sup>63</sup>

### **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

The MENA region is a diverse group of countries that constantly experiences socio-economic and political instabilities due to its strategic position to greater hegemonic powers. This has affected its labor market directly, and overall is suffering from a bloated public sector. However, the main dilemma is the unemployment of the youth. These can be two contradictory concepts; however, this is an ostensible fact in that part of the world. Formal employment in the MENA region is desirable due to historical record of employment, benefits and flexibility. The aforementioned countries can explain the chaos within the public sector, and the urgent call for reform to fix the situation has been loudly addressed. Perhaps all the addressed problems are not quite the same, but they should be evaluated separately within the country’s context. Too much dependency on natural resources that I only can compare it to a resource curse or what is commonly known as “Dutch disease” in some MENA countries, wherein the dependency on natural resources causes a multitude of economic problems for a resource rich state<sup>64</sup>. Furthermore, Egypt having a large population and poor in natural resources is facing a big problem of mainly educated youth unemployment, and research has shown the political instability is deteriorating the situation further. Last but not the least, Saudi Arabia’s conservative mores has left most women

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63. Hall (2017)

64. El-Anshasy, Kamiar and Jeffrey (2015)

without jobs, and this is for not imbedding equality and diversity within their employment law.

MENA countries need to get on board and push the initiative reform approaches they started with greater force because not having a proper employment reform places the society in danger and foreseeable instability. MENA governments should reread their employment policies, and make sure employment is based on merit and has a strategic background. As population is constantly growing reviewing retiring policy, empowering and investing in private sector for creating jobs, and retraining employees to perform other tasks. Diversification of resources can contribute to the economic growth especially for oil-rich countries or vice versa because once that resource goes away, employees will need look for employment in a completely different sector. An education reform should be carried out along with the employment reform, and this is to make sure the skills are matching the labor requirement. Corruption is another factor that needs to fight against in the MENA region, and bloated employment is associated with corrupt political parties that serves ghost employees. One way to fight and capture these fake employees are through digitalizing the employment records though proposed reform acts like biometric scans that prevent duplicates and non-exciting physical employees. Also, including women in the labor force under the diversity package will serve productivity and innovation in the long run, as most of the MENA countries are living life without the untapped talents and skills of women that are present. Once all of these are made official and put on paper as a solid set of law, then the MENA region can proceed to the next level in the modern economic playing field.

**Table of Figures:**

**Figure 1: Latest Growth Projections (IMF 2017).**

For Middle East and North Africa Region, Reforms Can Refuel Growth Engines, IMF, 2017, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/05/01/NA050217-For-MiddleEast-NorthAfrica-region-reforms-can-refuel-growth-engines>, accessed 19 May 2018.

**Figure 2: Problems within the HRM in the MENA region that needs reform (OECD 2010).**

OECD (2010) “Progress in Public Management in the Middle East and North Africa: Case Studies on Policy Reform” [online] available from <<https://www.oecd.org/mena/governance/48634338.pdf>> [19 May 2018].

**Figure 3: Egypt’s Unemployment Rate (Rebel Economy 2013).**

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**Figure 4: Youth Unemployment Rate in Egypt 2007–2017 (Statista 2018).**

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**Figure 5: Women Unemployment Rate in Saudi Arabia (General Authority for Statistics: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2018).**

General Authority for Statistics: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2018) “Women Unemployment Rate in Saudi Arabia” [online] available from < <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/820>> [30 May 2018].

**Figure 6: Saudi Employment Rate by Sector (Ministry of Labor and Social Development: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2016).**

Ministry of labor and Social Development: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2016) Saudi Arabia Labor Market Report 2016 3rd edn. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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