



Repercussions of the U.S.–Israeli–Iranian Geopolitical Escalation (2026) on Higher Education in the Arab World

Abstract

This report aims to analyze the direct and structural impacts of the U.S.-Israeli-Iranian war's geopolitical and military escalation during the first quarter of 2026 on the higher education sector in the Arab region. It further seeks to explore future trajectories and formulate actionable policy recommendations. Employing a public policy analysis methodology supported by comparative studies and strategic foresight, the report draws upon international institutional sources, documented media reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature. The findings reveal a complex crisis facing Arab universities, manifested in the forced transition of numerous institutions to distance learning—particularly in Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain, and to some extent in other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Additionally, the crisis led to the cancellation or postponement of international entrance exams for over 11,000 students and to a surge in organized cyberattacks targeting academic digital infrastructure. The report concludes that higher education has evolved into a strategic battlefield within fifth-generation warfare. This reality necessitates a radical shift from improvised responses to the adoption of proactive institutional mechanisms grounded in digital sovereignty, diversification of funding sources, strengthening regional academic cooperation, and the development of integrated knowledge security systems. Finally, the report presents five urgent, medium-, and long-term policy recommendations to ensure the sustainability of the Arab academic system and protect it from successive geopolitical shocks.

Keywords: Arab Higher Education; 2026 Geopolitical Conflict; U.S.; Iran; Forced Digital Transformation; Brain Drain; Institutional Resilience.

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa regions are undergoing profound and accelerating geopolitical transformations that are reshaping regional balances and casting heavy shadows over public spending priorities, technological supply chains, academic mobility, and cross-border scientific cooperation networks. At the heart of these transformations, a direct military and political escalation emerged during the period extending from February to April 2026 between the United States, Israel, and Iran. This escalation was not confined to conventional military arenas; rather, its shockwaves extended to internationally connected academic institutions, digital infrastructures, and the Arab knowledge sphere as a whole. Field realities have revealed that modern warfare is no longer measured solely by the scale of physical destruction, but also by the ability of conflicting parties to disrupt the soft infrastructures that constitute the backbone of human development and

future innovation, foremost among them higher education.

In this context, higher education represents a highly sensitive strategic sector. It serves as a fundamental driver of economic development, a cradle for scientific research, and a vital instrument for strengthening national knowledge security. At the same time, it has become an indirect target in fourth- and fifth-generation wars that rely on institutional fragmentation, technological isolation, and the politicization of academic spaces. Historical experiences in Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine have demonstrated that universities are often among the first silent victims of major crises, as attention to their reconstruction tends to decline relative to that for security and physical infrastructure (Coelho & Silva, 2026).

However, the current context in 2026 presents unique challenges distinct from those of previous crises. The present conflict combines direct military strikes, organized cyber warfare, accumulated economic pressures, and deliberate targeting of knowledge infrastructures. International reports have documented that more than seven American universities with branches in the region were forced

to shift to remote learning as a precautionary measure following explicit threats from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard targeting Western-affiliated academic institutions (Al Jazeera, 2026; Custer, 2026; Frantzman, 2026). These institutions include major academic symbols such as the American University of Beirut, New York University Abu Dhabi, and Education City in Qatar, reflecting a fundamental transformation in the concept of "academic neutrality" and the conversion of universities into instruments of geopolitical pressure.

Economically, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and escalating regional tensions led to a projected contraction of the Iranian economy of up to 10%, alongside inflation rates approaching 40%. These repercussions spread sequentially to neighboring Arab economies through multiple channels, including rising energy prices, regional market instability, and shrinking government expenditure (Hafezi & Mcdowall, 2026). Estimates from the United Nations Development Program indicate that the total economic losses sustained by Arab countries during only one month of the escalation ranged from \$120 to \$194 billion, accompanied by GDP declines of 3.7% to 6% and the loss of approximately 3.7 million jobs (Al Jazeera, 2026c). These conditions create severe pressure on higher education budgets, which, in most Arab countries, depend heavily on government funding, resulting in reduced research grants, frozen recruitment of academic talent, delays in updating academic infrastructure, and a long-term decline in the region's attractiveness to international educational investment (Shearing, 2026).

Alongside these material challenges, digital threats have intensified to unprecedented levels. Specialized security reports indicate a significant rise in cyberattacks targeting the educational sector, with a growing focus on universities engaged in research on energy, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity (ENISA, 2025). Organizations specializing in educational security have documented major cyber incidents targeting higher education institutions, utilizing generative artificial intelligence techniques to complicate intrusion and intellectual property theft methods (Jisc, 2026). Arab countries confront these challenges with varying levels of preparedness. While Gulf states possess more resilient digital infrastructures and diversified sources of academic funding, countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan suffer from compounded vulnerability stemming from limited resources and their geographical proximity to conflict zones,

thereby deepening academic disparities within the region.

The importance of this report lies in consolidating dispersed documentary evidence within a systematic analytical framework that guides policymakers toward effective policy responses rather than merely offering reactive descriptions of the crisis. The report is grounded in the central assumption that the continuity of higher education within volatile geopolitical environments cannot be secured through temporary reactions alone, but rather through comprehensive institutional reengineering that integrates digital resilience, knowledge sovereignty, and regional cooperation into the core strategies of academic survival.

Problem and Questions

The regional escalation during the first quarter of 2026 revealed the critical condition faced by Arab universities due to direct targeting or threats thereof. Iran declared all American universities in the Middle East to be legitimate military targets (University Herald, 2026), forcing dozens of universities to suspend in-person education, close campuses, or shift compulsorily to digital models without adequately prepared infrastructure or personnel trained in academic crisis management. Preliminary estimates indicate that these emergency measures disrupted the academic trajectories of thousands of international students, canceled accredited exchange programs, and postponed standardized international examinations, threatening the quality of educational outcomes and the continuity of academic accreditation (ICEF Monitor, 2026; Times Higher Education, 2026a). This dynamic reflects a fundamental transformation in the role of higher education, from a stable knowledge environment to an unstable emergency setting in which priorities of physical safety and institutional security override pedagogical standards, thereby necessitating a radical reassessment of academic continuity models in contexts of complex conflict.

Parallel to this operational paralysis, national budgets were redirected toward security and stability priorities, resulting in a severe shortage of funding for scientific research and development. This occurred despite UNESCO and ESCWA data indicating that Arab spending on research remains below the global average, thereby deepening the structural knowledge gap (ESCWA, 2025). This

situation was accompanied by restrictions on international partnerships, disruptions to joint research projects, and an escalation of preventive migration among academic talent, especially in countries directly affected by the escalation. Qualitative reports reveal that these dynamics extend beyond financial dimensions to include the politicization of university spaces and the practice of self-censorship concerning research topics related to the conflict, weakening the neutrality of scientific production and threatening the sustainability of cross-border knowledge cooperation networks (BenAmara, 2026; Makdisi & Tucker, 2026).

In this context, complex digital and security challenges have emerged, placing the independence of university infrastructures at risk. E-learning platforms and research databases have been subjected to waves of targeted cyberattacks, including disruptions to cloud services, attempts to compromise intellectual property, and sophisticated phishing attacks supported by artificial intelligence (SOCRadar, 2026; ENISA, 2025). Although reliance on digital models accelerated as an emergency response, this unplanned transformation generated what the literature classifies as institutional and individual "technostress," especially amid the absence of unified protocols for managing digital crises and weak data governance mechanisms capable of ensuring informational sovereignty over academic archives (Tavolacci et al., 2021; Jisc, 2026). This accumulation of operational, financial, security, and governance challenges reveals an urgent need to redesign the institutional contract between universities, states, and the international community so that higher education can evolve from being a victim of geopolitical volatility into a strategic actor capable of resilience, protecting human capital, and ensuring the continuity of knowledge production even at the height of crises.

The central research problem is the following main question: What is the impact of the geopolitical and military escalation in the first quarter of 2026 on higher education institutions in the Arab world? From this main question, the report seeks to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What are the direct effects of the conflict on the operational infrastructure of Arab universities in terms of continuity of face-to-face education, campus closures, and disruption of international examinations?

2. How have the economic pressures generated by the conflict affected higher education funding, scientific research expenditure, and international funding partnerships?

3. To what extent has the escalation influenced academic mobility, brain drain, and the decline of collaborative research production?

4. How has the conflict contributed to reshaping models of e-learning, and what challenges are associated with the unplanned forced digital transformation?

5. What cyber threats confront university digital infrastructures, and how can academic data and intellectual property be secured amid the escalation of hybrid warfare?

6. What are the potential strategic scenarios for the future of Arab higher education in light of possible trajectories of the conflict, and what early warning indicators characterize each scenario?

Literature Review

The field examining the impact of conflicts on education has experienced sustained growth since the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, most foundational literature has historically concentrated on primary and secondary education, leaving higher education at the margins of analytical inquiry.

The pioneering work of Margaret Sinclair (2002) is considered the first major reference to frame education as an urgent humanitarian necessity during crises. This approach was later institutionalized in the Minimum Standards developed by the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2024), emphasizing that sustaining educational processes constitutes a vital response no less important than food and shelter during and after conflicts. Concerning higher education specifically, Philip G. Altbach and Jamil Salmi (2011) addressed the structural challenges confronting universities in fragile economies and unstable environments, establishing a comparative institutional framework demonstrating that universities in conflict zones suffer from disrupted funding, faculty migration, and erosion of international accreditation, thereby transforming them from engines of innovation into institutions focused primarily on survival.

For example, reports indicate that armed conflicts lead to the near-total paralysis of higher education sectors due to the direct targeting of facilities. In the

Gaza Strip, approximately 95% of university campuses were damaged, with 22 out of 38 campuses destroyed and 14 others suffering severe damage. The destruction also included the loss of digital infrastructure, including 120,000 computers, 105 servers, and 620 specialized laboratories, rendering these institutions entirely inoperable (UNESCO, 2025a).

Economically, sanctions and financial pressures represent one of the most extensively documented dimensions in literature. The study by Katz and Sherman (Galyani-Moghaddam, 2025) demonstrated that international sanctions imposed on Iran historically isolated Iranian universities from global scientific research databases, hindered participation in international conferences, and reduced academic cooperation with Western institutions. Likewise, the study by Mixell et al. (2022) confirmed that universities dependent on international funding and cooperation programs are among the most severely affected by economic pressures, as their research activities are almost entirely suspended due to financial restrictions and disruptions in technological supply chains.

Concerning academic brain drain, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2025) confirmed that the Arab region suffers from a severe loss of intellectual capital, ranking among the world's leading exporters of highly qualified professionals and experts. This phenomenon intensifies in countries experiencing geopolitical tensions and armed conflicts, resulting in the depletion of academic and research institutions' creative human capacities due to instability and job insecurity.

Within this context, available data indicate that nearly 22% of the higher education workforce—including academics and administrators—in conflict zones have been killed, injured, or detained, posing a serious threat to the continuity and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. This shortage of qualified personnel impedes future efforts to rebuild academic infrastructure (UNESCO, 2025a).

The migration of academic talent does not merely create a quantitative shortage in teaching staff; it also undermines universities' ability to absorb students and researchers, deliver competitive research projects, and maintain international academic accreditation. These findings align with observations by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2025), which

documented continued migration flows from conflict zones, exacerbating the depletion of human capital that threatens academic sustainability.

In the context of digital transformation, the COVID-19 pandemic generated a vast body of literature concerning online education during crises. This report draws upon that conceptual legacy while adapting it to the contemporary geopolitical context. Research by Tavalacci et al. (2021) demonstrated that forced transitions to online education without adequate planning generate what the literature terms "technostress," a condition of chronic anxiety and cognitive exhaustion resulting from interaction with unfamiliar digital systems. In the Arab context, the OECD (2025) confirmed that the digital divide deepens inequalities in access to higher education due to security and economic conditions, making forced digital transformation a factor that intensifies rather than alleviates institutional fragility.

Cybersecurity literature in higher education represents one of the newest and fastest-growing research trajectories. Reports issued by the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2025) revealed a significant increase in organized cyberattacks targeting academic institutions to steal intellectual property and disrupt academic management systems. Meanwhile, Jisc (2026), a specialized British educational cybersecurity body, documented major cyber incidents targeting higher education institutions that used artificial intelligence to generate sophisticated phishing campaigns and compromise authentication systems. Despite the rich literature on the impact of conflict on education in previous contexts, studies focusing specifically on "Arab higher education" in the context of the emerging U.S.–Iran conflict of 2026 remain extremely limited. Furthermore, most existing studies have treated higher education merely as a dependent variable linked to indicators of stability, without incorporating it into broader frameworks of national knowledge security and proactive institutional resilience. This report seeks to bridge this gap by presenting a contemporary analysis that combines recent field data with a multidimensional theoretical framework, thereby contributing to the development of the literature on the "university under geopolitical pressure" within the contemporary Arab context.

Methodology

This report adopts an integrated public policy analysis approach combined with comparative case study analysis and strategic foresight. This approach enables a seamless transition between two levels of analysis: the diagnostic level, which focuses on understanding the current reality and monitoring its implications, and the foresight level, which concentrates on constructing future scenarios and formulating policy recommendations. This methodology is considered the most appropriate for the cognitive and practical requirements of the study due to the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, which combines intertwined military, economic, technological, and institutional dimensions that cannot be adequately understood through fragmented analysis alone.

The study relies on official institutional sources, including reports issued by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity, Jisc for educational cybersecurity, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. In addition, the report draws on verified, credible media sources, including reports published by Al Jazeera Media Network, Inside Higher Ed, The Guardian, Reuters, CNN, and Times Higher Education during the period from March to April 2026. These sources provided real-time data concerning campus closures, examination postponements (Kapur, 2026), evacuation operations, and direct security threats. Finally, the study incorporates peer-reviewed academic literature indexed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases that addresses the impact of conflicts on higher education in comparable contexts, thereby enabling analytical comparisons with the experiences of Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine.

The report relied on five sequential analytical procedures to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness:

- Systematic documentary mapping of documented events related to the higher education sector during the period from February to April 2026.
- Binary classification of impacts into direct effects (immediate operational disruptions such as campus closures and examination

suspensions) and indirect effects (long-term structural consequences such as brain drain and declining international investment).

- Comparative analysis across case studies including Lebanon, Iraq, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Palestine, and Syria, to identify varying patterns of impact.
- Application of institutional SWOT analysis to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats confronting the Arab higher education system.

Construction of strategic scenarios based on the strategic foresight methodology developed by Peter Schwartz (1997), which enables the anticipation of multiple trajectories according to the interaction between two key variables: "the intensity of geopolitical escalation" and "the speed of Arab institutional response."

The report acknowledges several methodological limitations that were addressed transparently. First, the rapidly evolving nature of geopolitical events renders some data susceptible to rapid updating. This challenge was mitigated by prioritizing official institutional sources whenever contradictions emerged among reports. Second, direct field verification of certain impacts is constrained by security and logistical challenges in conflict zones; therefore, the study compensated by relying on official university correspondence, educational authority statements, and documented reports issued by international organizations. Third, a focus on documented digital and media sources may introduce a slight bias in favor of countries with greater media visibility. This issue was addressed through source triangulation and through explicit differentiation between quantitatively documented data and qualitative foresight-based estimations. This integrated methodological framework ensures the credibility of the findings and enhances their applicability in the formulation of Arab higher education policies.

Results and Analysis

The geopolitical and military escalation during the 2026 U.S.–Israeli–Iranian war revealed complex repercussions that affected the pillars of the Arab higher education system, extending beyond temporary crises to constitute a structural threat to

academic sustainability. These repercussions can be classified into four major dimensions: operational and academic; economic and financial; human and research-related; and technological and cyber-related.

First Axis: Direct Effects on Institutional Infrastructure and Educational Continuity

Documented evidence revealed that the geopolitical escalation during the first quarter of 2026 created an immediate operational shock within the Arab higher education sector. This shock manifested in partial or total campus closures and forced transitions toward digital alternatives in several countries located near conflict zones (Alonso, 2026a; Sohail, 2026). As a result of disparities in digital preparedness, the nature of security threats, and national emergency-management policies, educational continuity strategies diverged into three principal operational models.

The First Model: Comprehensive Digital Transformation

The Gulf Cooperation Council states—namely, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain—adopted a fully remote learning model as a unified precautionary measure to ensure the safety of academic staff and students (Saseendran, 2026; Bloomberg, 2026). This shift reflected the advanced digital infrastructure within these educational systems, where physical attendance was temporarily suspended and replaced by officially approved online platforms that maintained uninterrupted educational operations (Times Kuwait, 2026).

The Second Model: Hybrid and Decentralized Education

Several countries adopted approaches based on geographic differentiation and field-risk assessment, generating flexible hybrid models responsive to shifting security dynamics:

- In Saudi Arabia, remote learning was implemented at universities in the Eastern Province, such as Dammam and Al-Ahsa, due to their proximity to conflict areas. In contrast,

institutions in other regions, such as Jeddah, continued in-person instruction.

- In Lebanon, the security reality imposed a functional division: universities in relatively stable areas maintained face-to-face education, whereas institutions near Beirut and southern regions shifted to online or blended models.
- In Yemen, complete decentralization of academic decision-making was implemented, granting each university institutional autonomy while providing digital alternatives for students unable to attend in person.
- In Palestine and the Kurdistan Region, exceptional measures were adopted. Palestine implemented a "dual qualitative education" strategy in which theoretical instruction was delivered online while practical sessions remained face-to-face. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Regional Government announced a temporary suspension of classes due to security tensions near Erbil Airport (Sawahel, 2026).

The Third Model: Continuation of Face-to-Face Education with Emergency Flexibility

Other states maintained conventional educational operations while retaining rapid-response mechanisms for emergencies. In Jordan and Oman, in-person education continued without major changes. Universities in Iraq and Syria likewise preserved regular instruction while resorting to temporary suspensions or partial digital transitions only in areas directly affected by security escalations.

These findings indicate a fundamental transformation in academic concepts, as educational continuity is no longer tied exclusively to physical presence but increasingly to contextual and digital adaptability. The accelerated responses also reflected the transformation of Gulf states from "safe diplomatic and commercial havens" into "potential arenas of geopolitical risk," thereby imposing structural pressures on countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, which host large numbers of international students and global university branches (Sawahel, 2026; Alonso, 2026b). In this context, digital transformation emerged as an institutional safety valve for educational continuity, requiring regional universities to emulate globally flexible models, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, through proactive curriculum digitization and the

integration of crisis-management protocols into strategic planning. Moreover, the existence of robust emergency management systems and diplomatic coordination offices that facilitate emergency academic mobility has become an existential requirement for restoring international confidence in regional academic security.

Thus, the first third of 2026 represents a conceptual and operational turning point in Arab higher education, as the dynamics of conflict imposed a rapid reengineering of the "flexible campus" model. Quality and continuity standards have become contingent upon institutional capacity to shift seamlessly between educational modes while guaranteeing the physical and digital protection of academic environments during complex crises.

Second Axis: Economic Repercussions on Funding and Scientific Research

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz and escalating tensions led to broad economic contraction across the Arab region, with declining GDP and substantial job losses. This contraction directly affected higher education systems. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization confirms that higher education frequently becomes the weakest and most underfunded sector during responses to international crises. Despite serving as a key driver of long-term national recovery and peacebuilding, humanitarian efforts usually prioritize primary education, leaving significant funding gaps for universities and scientific research while limiting the ability of youth in conflict zones to regain hope for stable professional futures (UNESCO, 2025b).

United Nations assessments and economic analyses published during the first quarter of 2026 revealed profound structural consequences of the regional escalation. Cumulative economic losses across the Arab region were estimated between \$120 and \$194 billion, while the GDP of Gulf Cooperation Council countries contracted between 5.2% and 8.5% relative to pre-crisis growth trajectories (Al Dardari, 2026; Asharq Al-Awsat, 2026; The Straits Times, 2026; UNDP, 2026).

These figures reflect severe financial pressures on public budgets, compelling policymakers to redirect resources toward urgent security and stability priorities at the expense of long-term structural investments, particularly in scientific research and development. Analytical observations

further indicate that these funding transformations deepen the structural gap within the Arab research ecosystem, as collaborative scientific projects and academic talent recruitment programs are given lower priority in favor of emergency economic containment policies. Consequently, there is an urgent need to adopt flexible funding mechanisms capable of protecting knowledge infrastructures from erosion during periods of compounded crises.

Third Axis: The Repercussions of the U.S.–Iranian War on Educational Competencies and Scientific Exchange

This axis addresses the crisis of "intellectual and academic security" in the Arab region resulting from the U.S.–Iranian conflict at the beginning of 2026, during which universities transformed from incubators of knowledge into geopolitical targets within the rules of engagement. The danger of this situation is not limited to material losses; rather, it lies in the "qualitative depletion" of intellectual capital. Threats to the safety of academics and the targeting of research infrastructure led to the preventive migration of qualified personnel and the disruption of international cooperation networks, creating a knowledge gap whose effects may extend for decades. This development threatens the erosion of Arab higher education's competitive advantage, which took years of strategic investment to build. The following are the most significant repercussions of the U.S.–Iranian war on educational competencies and scientific exchange:

1. Security Threats and Brain Drain

- Assassination of prominent academics: Sources documented the deaths of three academics by name, including the Dean of the Faculty of Science at the Lebanese University, a professor specializing in physics, and the president of USAL, as a result of direct military strikes, marking an unprecedented escalation against the academic community (Makdisi & Tucker, 2026; Whitford, 2026).
- Threats targeting specific universities: The United States Embassy in Baghdad classified three universities in Iraq—Baghdad, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok—as potential targets in an official warning, placing educational institutions in a direct military

danger scenario (U.S. Embassy Baghdad, 2026).

- Restrictions on campus access: Strict entry measures were imposed on prestigious institutions such as the American University of Beirut, while activities in Education City in Qatar, including tram services and associated events, were suspended, effectively paralyzing daily academic life (Al Jazeera, 2026a).
- Preventive migration of academic talent: Field reports observed waves of departures or declining commitment among faculty members at major Lebanese universities such as AUB and LAU, driven by direct threats and rapidly changing security conditions (Pourahmadi, 2026; Alonso, 2026a). The targeting of civilian infrastructure, including research centers and laboratories, constitutes a violation of international norms and is expected to lead to forced brain drain, as researchers and students seek to escape an educational environment that has become a theater of direct military operations (Fixler & Garg, 2026).

2. Suspension of Academic Mobility and Cancellation of International Exchange Programs

- Suspension of academic travel: Dozens of prominent American universities, including Penn State, Washington State, Texas Tech, and Brown, suspended travel for their students and faculty to the region in response to the elevation of international travel warnings to Level Three (Pourahmadi, 2026; Alonso, 2026a).
- Cancellation or conversion of field programs: The Rice University summer program scheduled in Amman was canceled, the Middlebury College Levantine Arabic program was shifted to an online format, and Northeastern University redirected its programs away from the affected geographical areas, disrupting opportunities for experiential learning and field research (Rowsell, 2026a; Arab News, 2026).
- Impact on international students: In the context of the 2026 regional escalation, academic mobility for international students in the Arab region—particularly those enrolled in American and partner university programs—was severely disrupted by the suspension of educational travel and the emergency

restructuring of field programs. Reports confirmed that the crisis led to rapid institutional reassessment of study programs in the region, with many programs shifting online, being postponed, or redirected to alternative destinations. Educational institutions also reported waves of deferred or canceled applications from students planning to study in Gulf and Levantine countries (ICEF Monitor, 2026; Rowsell, 2026a). Accordingly, this indicator reflects a qualitative transformation in the dynamics of cross-border education, manifested in the erosion of institutional confidence in academic security and in the restructuring of international educational supply chains, despite the absence of precise, real-time statistics linking historical enrollment figures to the direct mechanisms of impact of the current crisis.

The war also caused profound disruptions to the 2026/2027 university admissions cycle across the Gulf region and in Iraq, due to airspace restrictions and the cancellation of international examinations. Transnational Education (TNE) programs operated by British and international universities in the region faced major operational challenges, forcing many institutions to suspend operations or relocate students. This threatens the continuity of international academic cooperation and state-funded scholarship programs, particularly in Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council states (British Council, 2026).

3. Disruption of Research Cooperation and Regional Academic Networks

- Freezing of joint projects: International research projects involving researchers from conflict-affected countries came to a halt, while field research in conflict zones became impossible to conduct, resulting in a temporal gap in knowledge production related to the regional context (Rowsell, 2026c).
- Obstacles to international participation: Researchers encountered major difficulties in applying for international research grants or participating in virtual conferences due to network disruptions and the deterioration of digital infrastructure in several Arab capitals (Rowsell, 2026c).

- Disruption of institutional networks: Coordination activities among Arab research centers were suspended, and long-term scientific partnerships lost priority in favor of emergency-response policies, threatening the continuity of regional knowledge alliances (Alonso, 2026a).
 - Reassessment of international presence: In the context of the 2026 regional escalation, some foreign universities operating branches in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf states—or planning to establish them—began reassessing their expansion plans due to concerns related to staff safety, insurance costs, and operational losses resulting from security instability (ICEF Monitor, 2026). This dynamic may generate financial and reputational consequences extending beyond the current crisis, especially given the strategic investments Gulf countries have made to attract international academic partnerships (RowSELL, 2026d). It should be noted that the UAE and Qatar together host more than 50 international university branches (AcademicJobs, 2026), making any institutional retreat within this network potentially consequential for the future of transnational education in the region, despite the absence of official quantitative data specifying the exact number of institutions that permanently suspended or withdrew their plans.
 - Risk of losing accreditation: Joint programs and international research centers face the risk of losing academic accreditation or global rankings if they cannot ensure the safe continuity of operations for staff and students (ICEF Monitor, 2026).
- Disruption of digital infrastructure: Reports documented three incidents involving disruptions to Amazon Web Services (AWS) data centers in the UAE and Bahrain, in addition to claims by the "Handala" group of wiping 40 terabytes of sensitive research data, threatening the continuity of academic archives and exposing the fragility of cybersecurity protections for scientific research (New Arab, 2026). Drone strikes targeting AWS data centers in the UAE and Bahrain caused widespread disruption of digital services, directly affecting universities and educational institutions that rely on these cloud services to manage operations. More than 109 cloud-based services were suspended, leading to paralysis in remote-learning platforms, loss of access to research databases, and disruption of university management systems in the "Middle East-1" region, revealing the vulnerability of complete dependence on centralized digital infrastructure in conflict zones (Cryptika News, 2026). Furthermore, Iran-linked groups such as "Handala" launched destructive "Wiper" malware attacks that erased thousands of devices across multiple countries. Higher education institutions were not spared from these attacks, as the digital identities of academic system administrators (Admin Planes) were targeted through sophisticated phishing campaigns, resulting in the loss of historical research data and the disruption of educational continuity in several regional states (SOCRadar, 2026).

4. Financial Pressures and the Fragility of Digital Infrastructure

- Erosion of research funding: Estimated Arab economic losses ranging between \$120–194 billion, combined with GDP declines of 3.7–6% and the loss of approximately 3.7 million jobs, coincided with a severe shortage in long-term research funding, compelling institutions to cancel expansion plans in research and development (UNDP in Al Jazeera, 2026c; Al Dardari, 2026).

5. Psychological–Academic Impacts and the Politicization of Research Spaces

- Institutional psychological burdens: Administrative testimonies described the circumstances as "exceptional," while a student petition spanning ten countries expressed an atmosphere of "anxiety and fear" that obstructed academic preparation and exhausted the psychological foundations of research productivity (iPetitions, 2026; Fultz, 2026).
- Emergency assessment mechanisms: In response to mounting pressures, institutions such as Georgetown University in Qatar adopted a Pass/Fail grading option as an exceptional measure to reduce students'

psychological and academic stress (Rowse, 2026b).

- Politicization of the research environment: Indirect pressures emerged on faculty members to adopt specific political positions and exercise self-censorship regarding "sensitive" topics related to the conflict, thereby weakening the neutrality of scientific research and threatening the independence of academic spaces (Makdisi & Tucker, 2026; iPetitions, 2026).
- In a related context, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization warned that neglecting psychosocial support for students and academics in regions such as Ukraine, Sudan, and Gaza Strip would result in the emergence of "lost generations" suffering from social exclusion and structural marginalization (UNESCO, 2025c).

Fourth Axis: Reshaping E-Learning Models and Digital Challenges

This axis addresses the radical transformation in the philosophy of higher education in the region, where e-learning is no longer merely a supplementary option but has become a strategic "survival model." This section examines how universities redesigned their digital environments to confront cyber threats and disruptions in technological supply chains, with particular emphasis on the concept of "digital sovereignty" in the storage of research data.

As a result of the war and its serious repercussions on the university environment, several academic institutions shifted from considering e-learning as a complementary or enhancement tool to treating it as a strategic "survival model" amid escalating geopolitical and security instability. This transformation was reflected in a comprehensive reengineering of digital infrastructure, most notably through the gradual transition from dependence on international public cloud platforms, such as Amazon Web Services (AWS), toward the adoption of local or closed cloud solutions aimed at protecting knowledge assets from external targeting and ensuring "digital sovereignty" over sensitive research data (Al Jazeera, 2026a). This shift did not occur in isolation from a turbulent security context, as cyber threat monitoring reports documented several targeted cyberattacks affecting educational and governmental domains in Kuwait and other Gulf states during the same period (SOCRadar,

2026). These developments reflect the transition of Arab universities from the stage of traditional "administrative digitization" to a model of "digital resilience," which prioritizes protecting knowledge infrastructures against deliberate intrusion or disruption.

Educational institutions also initiated the development of flexible academic assessment systems suited to the prevailing climate of psychological and security emergencies. High-stakes computerized examinations, which require network stability and physical attendance, were replaced with continuous assessment systems based on electronic portfolios (E-portfolios) and cumulative evaluation mechanisms, thereby reducing the operational shock experienced by students and researchers (Alonso, 2026a). Universities and branches of international academic institutions demonstrated exceptional operational flexibility in confronting geopolitical crises, particularly by immediately activating Learn from Anywhere (LfA) protocols. This advanced hybrid model enabled educational institutions to ensure uninterrupted academic continuity by allowing students affected by sudden travel restrictions or security tensions to access lectures and university resources from different geographic locations, thereby preserving student retention rates and protecting academic trajectories from collapse (AcademicJobs, 2026; Pourahmadi, 2026).

These rapid responses were not merely emergency procedures; rather, they constituted an initial model for digital crisis management that necessitates reconsideration of long-term university strategic plans to guarantee academic continuity under structural pressures. Nevertheless, this forced digital transformation was accompanied by major material and operational challenges, most notably disruptions to global technological supply chains, which led to rising costs for operating and maintaining servers and digital infrastructure in the medium term. As a result, the sustainability of digital models became a complex economic equation in which technical efficiency intersects with financial pressures (Alonso, 2026a).

In addition to financial pressures, the sudden transition to unfamiliar digital learning environments generated what educational literature describes as "technostress," a condition of cognitive exhaustion and chronic anxiety resulting from forced interaction with advanced digital systems under psychologically fragile circumstances

(Tavolacci et al., 2021). In response to this human dimension, leading institutions such as Georgetown University in Qatar adopted the Pass/Fail option on an exceptional basis as a mitigating mechanism to reduce psychological and academic burdens on students, revealing the depth of the indirect impact of the crisis on educational quality and the well-being of university communities (Alonso, 2026a). This complex reality confirms that the digitization of higher education in the region is no longer merely a matter of technical improvement but has become a strategic pillar of knowledge security and institutional resilience, requiring the integration of "digital crisis management" and "information sovereignty" into the core of future academic governance.

Fifth Axis: Cyber Threats and Academic Digital Infrastructure

This axis examines the transformation of academic digital space into a parallel battlefield to the physical conflict, where Arab universities faced organized cyber threats targeting their infrastructures and informational sovereignty. Cyberattacks are no longer limited to website disruptions; they now include the destruction of research data and the theft of intellectual property, using sophisticated offensive technologies, placing the concept of "educational cybersecurity" at the forefront of institutional survival strategies. Digital infrastructures in the academic and governmental sectors in the Gulf region are witnessing a significant increase in the frequency of targeted cyberattacks, which now extend beyond temporary service disruptions to threaten the continuity of educational and administrative systems. Cyber threat monitoring reports documented waves of cyber disruptions targeting governmental domains and digital portals in Kuwait and Qatar amid regional geopolitical instability (SOC Radar, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026a). Although specific figures on the number of affected domains or disruption rates have circulated publicly, official reports from national cyber emergency response centers continue to rely on descriptive classifications that confirm the intensification of targeting, without releasing public quantitative indicators to preserve national information security. Conversely, repeated disruptions to educational cloud services reliant on distributed infrastructure—such as those in the United Arab

Emirates and Bahrain—exposed the fragility of relying exclusively on global service providers during complex crises. This situation prompted academic and governmental institutions to reassess digital hosting models and explore local or hybrid storage alternatives to ensure continuity of educational services (SOC Radar, 2026).

At another level, cyber threats have increasingly targeted the core of knowledge production itself. Research laboratories specializing in artificial intelligence and renewable energy within Arab universities have become operational targets for Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) groups. Reports issued by the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (2025) and the British academic security network Jisc (2026) indicate a qualitative transformation in methods of knowledge espionage, driven by generative artificial intelligence, to design AI-driven spear-phishing attacks that accurately imitate institutional communication patterns. This significantly increases the success rate of compromising accounts belonging to faculty members and leading researchers. The combination of external service disruption and internal intellectual property theft creates a fragile research environment in which knowledge continuity is threatened by structural erosion or coercive redirection toward external agendas (SentinelOne, 2026; Unit42, 2026).

In confronting this complex threat landscape, the necessity arises for a strategic transition from traditional cloud dependency models toward the concept of "academic digital sovereignty," which combines the localization of sensitive research data storage, the development of independent institutional cyber fortifications, and the adoption of flexible incident-response protocols. The success of universities in implementing alternative assessment systems and activating flexible learning mechanisms during crises demonstrates that operational resilience is possible; however, it does not eliminate the need for institutional security infrastructures capable of withstanding systematic attacks. Accordingly, integrating "cyber risk management" and "research data governance" into the core of strategic planning for higher education is no longer an optional enhancement but rather an existential requirement for safeguarding the independence of the Arab knowledge system and protecting its outputs from geopolitical volatility and organized digital intrusions.

Sixth Axis: Future Strategic Scenarios

In light of the documented compounded repercussions, the current geopolitical reality requires a qualitative shift from reactive crisis management to proactive strategies grounded in structural resilience and digital sovereignty. Literature and comparative experiences indicate that the most resilient models are those that invested in autonomous digital infrastructures, diversified funding sources, and established alternative regional cooperation networks in advance (Shearing, 2026). Based on the strategic foresight methodology developed by Peter Schwartz (1997), four principal scenarios for the future of Arab higher education during the period 2026–2030 can be anticipated:

1. *Comprehensive Escalation Scenario (Medium Probability):*

This scenario assumes continued military expansion, direct targeting of Arab universities, and the collapse of diplomatic pathways. It would lead to the partial collapse of international campuses, mass migration of academic talent, loss of international accreditation, and a sharp decline in student enrollment. Its warning indicators include raising travel advisories to Level Four and targeting university buildings directly.

2. *Conflict Containment Scenario (High Probability):*

This scenario assumes that the parties reach a ceasefire or a gradual diplomatic settlement, accompanied by relative stabilization. It would result in relative academic continuity but with long-term funding challenges, declining international competitiveness, and slow reassessment of foreign partnerships. Its indicators include positive diplomatic signals and a reduction in the intensity of cyber threats.

3. *Accelerated Digital Transformation Scenario (Medium–High Probability):*

This scenario assumes the continuation of security pressures alongside relative stability and the availability of local technological capital. It would lead to the rise of Arab virtual universities, the development of sovereign educational

platforms, and the adoption of flexible hybrid models. Its indicators include major governmental investments in digital infrastructure and noticeable growth in independent Arab educational platforms.

4. *Educational System Restructuring Scenario (Low–Medium Probability):*

This scenario assumes the end of the conflict, the extraction of lessons learned, and the adoption of a unified Arab political will. It would lead to the establishment of robust Arab–Arab academic partnerships, the redefinition of educational models, and the institutionalization of knowledge security as a constitutional academic principle. Its indicators include unified regional political commitment and the establishment of joint funding mechanisms.

To confront these scenarios, the analytical review highlights several core strategies:

- **At the governmental level:**

Governments should adopt flexible strategies to diversify funding streams for higher education by establishing independent emergency funds, activating academic endowment systems, and strengthening strategic partnerships with the private sector. This is necessary to reduce dependence on conventional state budgets, which often contract during crises (Murray, 2026). Governments must also support digital sovereignty by investing in a shared Arab cloud infrastructure that ensures educational continuity independent of external geopolitical disruptions.

- **At the university level:**

Universities should build flexible, pre-accredited educational platforms and activate written, tested academic emergency protocols to ensure seamless transitions to online education without compromising quality standards. Furthermore, regional Arab–Arab partnerships should be strengthened to transform brain drain into organized internal academic mobility (ESCWA, 2025).

- **At the research and security level:**

There is a need to develop a regional university cybersecurity system in coordination with

specialized agencies, train personnel to confront AI-supported cyberattacks, and establish distributed backup mechanisms for sensitive research data (ENISA, 2025).

- **At the student level:**

Emergency student-support networks should be developed, including digital psychological support, flexibility in assessment and deadlines, and the guarantee of scholarship continuity for the most vulnerable groups, in response to documented demands by students across the region through international petitions calling for fair assessment mechanisms that reflect the realities of conflict (iPetitions, 2026).

Conclusion

The U.S.–Israeli–Iranian geopolitical conflict of 2026 represents a qualitative transformation akin to contemporary warfare, in which universities are no longer neutral spaces or marginal victims but have become strategic components in the equation of international power and direct or indirect targets in fifth-generation wars aimed at institutional fragmentation and knowledge isolation. The analytical findings of this report reveal that Arab higher education is confronting a multidimensional and compounded crisis that extends far beyond a temporary operational disruption. Operationally, many educational institutions were forced to make abrupt transitions to online learning. At the same time, admission pathways and international examinations for tens of thousands of students were disrupted, threatening both the continuity and quality of educational systems. Economically, research budgets contracted significantly, and most collaborative research projects were suspended at a time when operational costs were escalating and the region's attractiveness for international academic investment was declining. On the human level, the migration of qualified personnel accelerated at unprecedented rates. At the same time, academics themselves became targets of direct attacks, raising the prospect of a structural knowledge deficit whose effects may endure for decades. Furthermore, cyberattacks and disruptions to cloud services exposed the fragility created by excessive dependence on foreign digital infrastructures, thereby intensifying the risk of technological disruption during periods of crisis.

The fundamental dilemma revealed by this analysis lies not merely in the severity of the geopolitical shock itself, but in the absence of a comprehensive Arab institutional framework within higher education capable of addressing security crises. Most universities continue to respond to conflict-related shocks through reactive and improvised measures, lacking institutionalized emergency protocols, accredited alternative assessment systems, and regional cooperation networks capable of absorbing systemic disruptions. Redefining higher education as an essential pillar of national knowledge security requires more than supportive political rhetoric; it necessitates urgent institutional investments, radical restructuring of educational policy priorities, and the adoption of flexible governance models that integrate crisis preparedness into the core of university strategic planning. The academic future of the Arab region will not be determined solely by the scale of external threats, but rather by the speed and effectiveness with which policymakers and university leaders adopt proactive strategies that transform higher education from a geopolitical vulnerability into a resilient knowledge shield. Protecting universities today is synonymous with safeguarding the continuity of development, innovation, and the nation's intellectual identity in a world characterized by volatility and interconnected threats.

Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive analysis of evidence and future scenarios, the report presents the following five recommendations as an integrated and direct policy package for decision-makers in higher education and Arab universities:

1. Establishing a Sovereign and Sustainable Emergency Fund for Higher Education: Create a joint Arab fund or independent national funds financed through fixed allocations from government budgets, sovereign wealth fund revenues, and private-sector contributions to guarantee the continuity of university and research funding during periods of economic crises and financial sanctions, independent of fluctuations in security-related expenditures.
2. Building a Sovereign and Resilient Arab Academic Digital Infrastructure: Invest urgently in shared regional cloud-based

educational platforms, local research databases, and distributed backup mechanisms for sensitive data to reduce dependence on foreign servers and platforms vulnerable to geopolitical disruption or cyber intrusion. This should be accompanied by the adoption of unified cybersecurity standards capable of confronting AI-driven cyberattacks.

3. Activating an Internationally Accredited Regional Academic Cooperation Network (Arab–Arab): Conclude regional framework agreements enabling mutual recognition of academic credits, exchange of academic staff and students, and the establishment of alternative joint research programs. This would transform the trajectory of brain drain from external loss into organized internal academic mobility that strengthens Arab knowledge integration and reduces dependence on vulnerable Western partnerships.
4. Adopting Unified and Pre-Accredited Academic Emergency Protocols: Arab universities should commit to annual testing of comprehensive operational emergency plans that ensure rapid transitions to online learning, fair alternative assessment mechanisms, and emergency accreditation standards recognized by international accreditation bodies, thereby safeguarding the rights of students and academics during sudden closures.
5. Establishing a Regional Center for Knowledge Security and University Psychological Support: Create a specialized body affiliated with a relevant Arab organization such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization or Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization to monitor cyber threats targeting universities, provide legal and academic support for affected institutions, and implement institutional digital psychological-support programs for students and staff impacted by geopolitical crises, thereby ensuring the sustainability of academic environments and the quality of human outcomes.

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