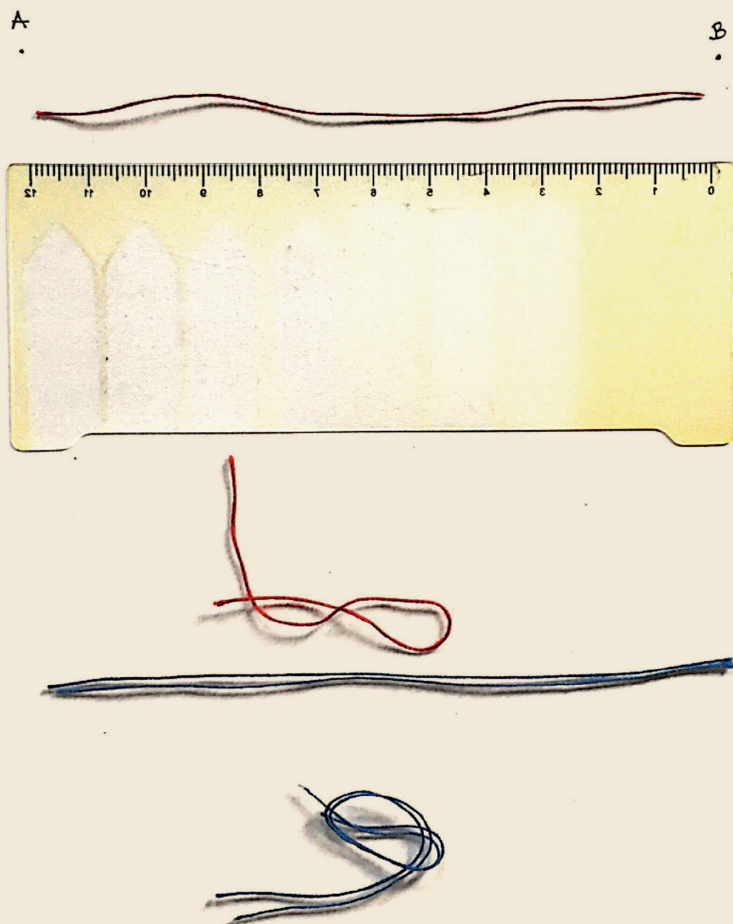




ASA MONOGRAPHS SERIES • 59



# EDUCATING OTHERWISE

Contexts, Interventions and Radical  
Possibilities of Anthropological Learning

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Edited by **Sarah Winkler-Reid**

## EDUCATING OTHERWISE

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### **Volume 59**

*Educating Otherwise: Contexts, Interventions and Radical Possibilities of Anthropological Learning*

*Edited by Sarah Winkler-Reid, Caroline Gatt, Tim Ingold, Elsayed E. Abdelhamid, Soumhya Venkatesan, Simone Dennis, Mariya Ivancheva, Cris Shore, Cynthia Sear and Andrew Dawson*

# Educating Otherwise

## *Contexts, Interventions and Radical Possibilities of Anthropological Learning*



Edited by

Sarah Winkler-Reid, Caroline Gatt, Tim Ingold,  
Elsayed E. Abdelhamid, Soumhya Venkatesan,  
Simone Dennis, Mariya Ivancheva, Cris Shore,  
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# Online Political Training in Exile

## *Al Sharq Academia Platform*

Elsayed E. Abdelhamid with Mohammad Affan



*This text is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with Dr Mohammad Affan at Al Sharq Forum<sup>1</sup> – an Istanbul-based think-tank in February 2022 and February and March 2023. Affan is the director of Al Sharq Academia. The text is transcribed and translated from Arabic by Elsayed, and reviewed by Dr Affan.*

I have been following the courses of Al Sharq Academia (SA) since 2017, when I started to look for opportunities to learn social sciences in Egypt alongside my BA degree in translation at Al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo. As quality social science education in Egypt is privatized and not accessible to many (in terms of linguistic, geographical and economic barriers, to mention a few), I found SA an example speaking to my need. Through time, I developed an interest in pedagogical initiatives that (aspire to) practise decolonization, in the descriptive, pragmatic sense of the word. This interview is an attempt to shed light on the politics and problematics of producing and teaching online political content with the aim of working on gradual long-term ‘democratic’ change in contemporary Al Sharq region. Dr Affan refers geopolitically to the Middle East as the Al Sharq region, and uses the term in a cultural sense when referring to Islamic civilization. Taking Al Sharq Academia as an example, what interests me here regarding its work is to show a case of how the academia’s team, represented here by Dr Affan, circumvented many of the challenges they faced in trying to translate political activism and aspirations for democratic change into a platform that channels the complexities of what the political might mean, in the current postcolonial, post-Arab Revolution context.

I believe that the academia is unique in its mission of targeting the region’s civil and political activists, and providing them with intellectual

and realpolitik tools. The academia's team do not frame their work as one of decolonizing as such. However, approaching the work of the academia from the analytical point of view of Mbembe's disenclosure, the overarching focus of this part of the book, I believe that the academia's work practises lifting closures in the educational and political systems. And in a context where legacies of colonialism shape subjectivities and the order of things, attempts at progressive social change, by definition include, but cannot be limited to, the colonial effects. The lingering shadows of history that overshadow the content of courses available in the academia show the enduring effects of the postcolonial structures. Notwithstanding, as a disenclosing initiative, Al Sharq Academia challenges repressive mechanisms for controlling knowledge in the MENA region, gives free online content to understand relevant social and political topics, and provides a space for expressing assemblages of political ideas and paradigms.

*Before talking about your work in Al Sharq Academia, can you tell me about your experience in political training since 2008, as I think it is inseparable from your role now as the academia's director?*

Thank you, Elsayed, for your academic interest in the SA. It's a real pleasure to have the opportunity to reflect on this project and share with you my personal experience in the field of political training in general.

As you know, I came to academia from an activist background. I used to be an Islamist activist during my undergraduate course in medicine at Ain Shams University in Cairo between 1998 and 2003, engaging in many activities such as campaigning, protesting, issuing magazines, organizing rallies and events, etc. After graduation, I became more concerned with political training and mentorship. Hence, I started to search for organizations or institutes for political education and training to enhance my professionalism; however, under the authoritarian rule of Mubarak, it was not an easy task. At the same time, I started to take part in designing and executing a number of programmes for political training to be offered to the universities' activists.

After the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and the Arab world at large, things changed dramatically. On the one hand, there was a dire need for raising political awareness and developing the skills of the youth activists who were heavily engaging in politics during the revolutionary fervour. On the other hand, many initiatives for political training were launched utilizing the opportunity of political freedom during the transitional period. Therefore, I had a wider chance to be involved in many training projects, including an online platform called Syasi. With such a project, I realized the advantages of remote training tools: it is more convenient, more appealing to youth, with an international reach, and with fewer logistical headaches. These advantages became very valuable when the window of opportunity closed rapidly

after the 2013 coup, and organizing in-person political training in Egypt became very challenging.

In short, SA is a product of many influences: the frustration of the failed Arab Spring, which was due to the lack of experience and the modest abilities of the revolutionary activists, the challenges of the resurgent authoritarianism which undoes the achievements of the Arab Spring in terms of political freedoms, and the opportunities granted by communication technologies.

*What is Al Sharq Academia?*

It is an online platform offering a range of academic courses that aim at disseminating knowledge from the social sciences and humanities, and is targeted at civil and political activists with a view to enhancing informed action. Our goal is to develop political awareness in the Al Sharq region through short courses in political sciences, and exclusively in Middle East politics. We provide convenient, contextualized content through relevant topics and approaches.

Our courses target non-academic and non-specialized activists, civil society practitioners and interested individuals from the region. We also work on providing activists with capacity-building and networking opportunities. The main language of teaching in the academia is Arabic. A few courses are in English with Arabic subtitles, provided by non-Arab lecturers. Courses in English attracted audiences from Indonesia, Pakistan and India, so not only the MENA region, where our primary audience is located.

*What kind of courses are offered by the academia, and whom do they target?*

We started by providing short courses, which consist of knowledge-driven content, either as individual courses, the massive open online courses (MOOCs), or specializations, a series of courses focused on certain topics. Examples of this are the Specialization Certificate in Islam and Politics, and the Specialization Certificate in Middle East Politics. These are recorded introductory courses for people who have not studied social sciences before. Students enrol and self-study the content, and are awarded a certificate at the end.

Later, we wanted to add skill- and experience-based training, i.e. capacity building, to the knowledge-based content. We now provide the Executive Diploma Programmes, remote learning executive programmes in the fields of social and administrative sciences that are based on hybrid education (self-study and interactive models) through a series of recorded lectures, weekly discussions with the lecturers, and periodic training. The diplomas provide opportunities for participants to engage in discussions, participate actively, ask questions, present case studies, complete periodic assessments, and undertake a graduation capstone project to fulfil the diploma

requirements. The diplomas are policy-orientated programmes, not only for gaining knowledge but also applying it.

We started with the Executive Diploma in Governmental Administration; then we added the Executive Programme in NGO Management and the Executive Programme in Think-Tank Management. In the latter programme, for example, we teach not only the research skills and how think-tank research is different from academic research, but also project management and communication strategies and tools in think-tanks. The diplomas are different from courses as they are specialized, function-driven and applied. Their goal is to build skills and transfer practical experiences to participants. In each diploma we seek to invite decision-makers to share their experiences with the participants. These can be officials who work in municipalities, labour unionists, party members, parliamentary members or ex-diplomats. We invited a Yemeni health minister, for instance, to talk about decision-making in ministries. Also, the lecturers are practitioners with applied experiences. So the diplomas are skill- and experience-tailored programmes.

We are now preparing a fourth diploma on political party administration. There will be a course on party fundraising, governance, political campaigns and other areas. So, in SA, we have been developing two main approaches: from providing introductory knowledge-orientated content to specialized capacity-building training.

*How does the process of making courses usually go?*

We put together a list of general themes that we want to cover. Then we start searching among our networks for the best people to cover those themes. Sometimes, we publish a call for lecturers. Also, if there is a recent book that discusses a contemporary issue, we invite the scholar to cover the book topic in the academia. Further, there is a tab on the website to suggest a course to teach in the academia, so interested lecturers can contact us with their suggestions directly.

We ask selected lecturers, first, to send us the course information with a detailed outline and forty multiple-choice questions or true-or-false questions for the take-home exam. We scrutinize the outline, and, if needed, we send recommendations to the lecturers to unpack some concepts, emphasize some issues or add subsections on some topics. As a guideline, we ask them to use practical examples and case studies from the MENA region. Then, we ask them to send us the PowerPoint presentation that will be shown in the videos. We review the content and, once confirmed, we invite the lecturers to Istanbul for three days to record the course. This includes a final review of the content and rehearsing in front of the camera, and then recording the whole course. The recorded videos go into the montage for post-production editing. We have an academic reviewer who checks the courses for

final edits on how well the content is presented. We then upload the course to the platform and announce that it is available.

We might also make an interactive live session. If there is an event related to the course's content, or within one or two years of publishing the course, we invite the lecturers to answer questions we received from the participants, either in their course assessment or from social media. We might add this as a complementary session to the course material on the platform.

*What do you mean by reviewing the content? On what basis are the themes decided?*

We do not intervene in the content from a political perspective but in how it is delivered to suit the participants. So reviewing means making sure that difficult concepts and complex ideas are taught smoothly for non-specialized audiences.

Our choice of the lecturers saves us a lot of time. If they are aware of the issues in the MENA region, they will have materials on critical issues in the region, and that's what we target.

*Have you ever encountered a situation where you refused to offer a specific course?*

Let me be honest with you. We wanted to offer a course on human rights; it is part of our agenda. However, we decided not to engage in the debate about whether human rights are universal or culturally specific, which would have led us to discuss LGBTQ+ rights, so we avoided the entire course. For us, it would open up too many discussions around these issues, which could lead to arguments. Besides, the platform is already banned in several Arab countries, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Another course was suggested to be provided by Professor Ilan Pappé, who is a well-known expatriate Israeli historian. The course was about understanding the Arab-Israeli conflict using the approach of settler colonialism. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the origins of the lecturer, I proposed the idea to the team for a discussion. For me, I wanted to approve the course because I am aware of the lecturer's scholarship and the importance of the topic. However, I wanted as well to listen to the team's opinions, especially as we have Palestinian work colleagues, on how the course might be received by different audiences. Might some people call this 'cultural normalization'? Would it be inappropriate for some? And so on. We were all convinced that the course is necessary, because it proposes a critical study of settler colonialism as a mode of rule. What I'm trying to say is that we don't simply exclude topics because of ideological reasons, but sometimes we need to consider other sensitivities and factors when proposing a certain topic.

*Why do you think the platform is banned in some countries?*

I don't know for sure. But, in the end, we are a political education platform in a very polarizing and polarized region, and we might happen to invite a lecturer to deliver a certain course who is not welcomed by certain regimes.

*Is one of the criteria in academia to achieve gender balance – for example, between female and male lecturers? And why doesn't the academy provide gender-related content?*

There is awareness of the necessity for gender balance, but there are practical limitations to reach full equality. For instance, in most cases, we recruit members to deliver the courses from our personal networks, which happen to be male-dominant. Currently, almost 20 per cent of our lecturers are female, so we are trying to practise positive discrimination in this matter.

As for the content, there is no priority in the agenda for integrating gender-related content – for example, there is no consideration for a diploma in Gender Studies. The topics we offer are still very basic, and are limited to traditional forms of political activism.

*Even if there is no specific gender-related content, it is possible to address certain issues from a gender perspective. For example, the role of women in party management or elections can be examined through a gender lens. If the candidate for an election campaign is a woman, the language of communication, negotiation and coalition-building may differ from that of a man, considering local and rooted discourses on women's participation in the public sphere, no?*

There might be a dominance of traditional thinking, but, I agree, it is crucial to develop programmes that address our female audience, as our target group includes women activists and professionals.

*For instance, topics like violence and conflict in Arab societies cannot be fully understood without a gendered perspective. Therefore, it becomes necessary to incorporate gender analysis to achieve a comprehensive understanding of such issues, which are part of the academia's current lists of courses. You are currently developing a 3rd programme, the Academia Practicum. Tell us more about it.*

It is straightforward intensive political training in the form of workshops or retreats. It will be only in-person. It will be applied and skill-focused workshops. It targets party members, activists [involved in social movements] and politicians. Training will be on holding political party demonstrations, electoral campaign management, political negotiations and forming coalitions, monitoring elections, and presentation skills for politicians. It will be in the form of small workshops, lasting for three to five days. Now we're trying to prepare handbooks for these workshops and find trainers.

*What challenges do you face in designing and preparing these workshops?*

First of all, it's hard to find professional political trainers in the Arab world. The business of political training and consultancy is very rudimentary due to unfavourable political conditions.

To design the appropriate training schemes, I believe, the trainers have to be from the Arab world or with extensive on-ground experience in the Arab world. For example, to prepare training modules on electoral campaigning,

we try to find people who were responsible for managing the electoral campaigns in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon.

*Which audiences does the academia target specifically?*

The academia is a platform for building political awareness in the Arab world through free courses and diplomas in Arabic. As I mentioned before, we target non-academic audiences from the Al Sharq region, such as civil society activists, professionals, non-profit sector workers and students of social sciences and humanities. But, in particular, we address three different segments with our three programmes: the courses target the people who are generally interested in social sciences; the executive diplomas target mainly grass-roots civil society activists and practitioners; and Academia Practicum will target professional and high-profile activists and politicians.

The academia has gained wide acceptance and popularity, as proved by both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Recently, the number of registrations for participation on the platform reached almost one hundred thousand, and the number of the students in the executive diploma programmes exceeds three hundred. Interestingly, some of the students who register on our platform and participate in our programmes are following us from inside prisons using smuggled mobile phones.

*The motto of the academia is 'disseminating knowledge for informed action'. What does this mean? What is the goal of Al Sharq Academia?*

The main idea is that we are trying to provide incubators to train future activists, politicians, and statesmen. Each system produces its leaders through various methods. In Egypt, for example, the state works to eliminate all competent political figures and talents through imprisonment, exile, or assimilation into the general system. At the same time, it continues to produce a specific type of loyalist. The state's bureaucratic, administrative and security apparatuses conduct training programmes for aspiring statesmen.

Egyptian society, on the other hand, is deprived of having similar opportunities, such as having institutions that foster its future statesmen who can shape its future, or independent civil society organizations. There is a natural development of certain careers: initially, one could be an assistant in an electoral campaign, then manage the campaign, and later become an assistant deputy candidate, and so on. However, authoritarian regimes work to sabotage these stages. There is an obsession with control. They destroy the assets of the society.

Since 2007, I have been concerned about how to establish incubators that foster the development of administrative, professional, organisational and political competencies within a society. What I have observed in Egypt is a constant state of improvisation; there are no stable institutions consistently producing statesmen or politicians. We lack a clear understanding of the mechanisms of the state. There is a noticeable absence of an ecosys-

tem that facilitates the growth of capable individuals, that allows them to transform their potential into accomplished leaders. It's a big void. This situation bears a resemblance to the concept of 'stunted growth' in children, wherein individuals are hindered from reaching their full potential due to the lack of a conducive environment for their growth and development.

That, in my opinion, is the real reason for the failure during the transitional period in Egypt between 2011 and 2013.

*And I would add the reason for the continuity of authoritarian rule before and after the 2011 revolution, not only the failed attempt to democratize. Talking about these incubators, do you think that the academia is reproducing hegemonic tools, working solely within statist logic?*

We are aware that there is no objective training. We work with the inspiration of the opposition. We, as well as our lecturers, have concerns about the abuse of state power. We are challenging the status quo. At the same time, we are halfway: we are neither thinking in a revolutionary way of fostering public awareness as a preparation for the revolution, nor are we anarchists advocating an anti-state, anti-system approach. We are providing skills that are important for the political development of our societies.

Political and social sciences shape analysts and researchers, not engaged activists and statesmen. Our programmes are tailored to people who work on the ground, who are in syndicates and parties; that's why we call it executive training.

We work in a context of counter-revolutions, instability and authoritarianism. When I read about exile politics, I see the typical activities that people mainly do are ideological reflections and capacity building. That's also the goal of the academia. So, when a new political opportunity emerges in the future, we hope that we will have more tools and awareness. During the transitional period, we had big dreams and ambitions, but we didn't know how to achieve them. We were not ready, and the results were the failure of the revolution.

*What do you want to achieve by this?*

I don't use the term 'the butterfly effect' often, which is how small changes can have significant impacts on the overall system over time. My aspiration is to help in creating capable cadres with perspectives that emerge from society, not from those in power. This is an attempt to train competent individuals to handle public affairs. Having such incubators is crucial for any society that seeks to thrive, despite continuous attempts at marginalization and oppression. Any political community must produce leaders capable of governing its public affairs. We train political activists by developing their political skills and enhancing their professionalism in their community. And, of course, we aim to maximize exposure: we are working at a regional

level, not focusing solely on one Arab country. There is networking and co-operation that naturally occurs within our initiatives.

We work extensively, not intensively. To continue your political activism in exile is like being in a battle, where you do not have infantry forces but you might have air forces. For me, utilizing virtual spaces for political education, training and networking is my work in exile.

*Speaking from the perspective of Al Sharq Academia, what might a form of decolonization (in academia and education) mean? I see that you don't even talk about this – some academies though are originally structured with the goal of decolonization.*

Decolonization is the flip side of colonization. To be obsessed with having authentic local knowledge that belongs to us is not the solution. That's why our lecturers are from everywhere. This mixture is very important for me; I want the visitor to the Academia's website to see Western and local, senior and junior scholars. The majority of our lecturers are from Islamic-orientated circles because those are our networks, but there is a real interest in diversity and in stressing that a solution is neither in our local knowledge nor in taken-for-granted knowledge from Western academia. For example, we have a course on the Treaties of Westphalia,<sup>2</sup> and how it can be important for contemporary debates on the nature of the Arab state.

This is a conscious stance. The best thing is to transcend the colonial–post-colonial binary. There is a mistake in portraying all European-produced knowledge as necessarily misguided in understanding non-European regions. Simultaneously, persistently viewing oneself using the Western perception is also incorrect. For us, the origin of the produced knowledge is not even within the evaluation criteria.

So Al Sharq Academia's approach is not ideologically dogmatic, meaning that if we are looking at a certain phenomenon, we do not assume that there is only one big paradigm that helps us to understand it. If anyone has something insightful to share with us, we invite them to talk about it, without putting too much emphasis on their paradigm. I'm very utilitarian when it comes to trying to understand the reality of the Middle East and the Arab world.

We think of the academia as a tool for political awareness. Political education is not a homogeneous endeavour in the style of delivery, whether fully Westernized or local. We got some recommendations from people that we need to be well-defined in order to appeal to our audiences. For Islamists, the academia is very Westernized, and for secularists, we are Islamists. For me, we are, in the end, a non-profit project, so we don't give priority to the revenue or the market share. Therefore, I don't give much attention to how we are ideologically classified; but presenting mixed, non-traditional courses in the academia is important.

We are facing a sociopolitical crisis. Arab societies struggle with self-governance, and tyranny weakens these societies whilst perpetuating its own ex-

istence. There is tyranny even within institutions. Realistically, how do we completely break free from this cycle? One suggestion is to work towards empowering these societies, enabling them to manage their interests independently. However, there is no single answer or definitive solution to this significant question. We welcome any valuable suggestions.

I have no problem with the solution that suggests that some communities, Libya for example, are better off organizing themselves based on tribal affiliation if that is proven to be a suitable local solution. After all, liberal democracy might not be entirely suitable for us, despite having many inspiring aspects. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. We cannot propose a universal solution to our societal crisis solely based on liberal ideology, nor neglect it altogether. In the end, we are searching for solutions and do not have the luxury of dismissing any ideas or paradigms on the grounds of not being authentically produced or formulated. This is a platform for fostering debates, not silencing them.

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## NOTES

1. Al Sharq concept, as defined by Dr Affan, refers geopolitically to the Middle East but, as he added, it is used also in a cultural sense referring to the Islamic civilization.
2. The course produced by Al Sharq Academia introduces an overview and analysis of the Thirty Years War and the attempts to end it, which led to the Treaties of Westphalia. The course draws the parallels and analogies of seventeenth-century Europe with the contemporary Middle East, proposing possible solutions to the region's geopolitical predicaments. The course can be joined, in English or Arabic, from this link: <https://academia.sharqforum.org/en/courses/the-peace-of-westphalia-lessons-for-todays-middle-east> (last accessed 28 January 2026).