

# NOTABLE INITIATIVES

PART OF THE BOLD GIVING INITIATIVE SERIES

## ▲ Overview

Across the Arab region, intrepid philanthropists are helping to improve many lives. Here are six innovative initiatives that demonstrate a variety of ways to achieve social impact.

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*Project Inspired*





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# INTRODUCTION

## RESEARCH ON THE ARAB REGION'S PRIVATE PHILANTHROPIC

landscape surfaced many initiatives that demonstrate promising results in targeting large, unmet social needs. These efforts are examples of strategic and impactful philanthropy, which fit some but not all of the specific criteria for fully qualifying as bold giving initiatives. They focus on different sectors and geographies in the region, but share several characteristics in terms of their approach: they pursue clearly defined goals, aim to improve many lives, focus on a specific social sector or population, and have a long time horizon for achieving impact.

Below are six of these notable initiatives. This is by no means an exhaustive list. The aim is to provide additional examples of how strategic giving takes shape across different sectors and geographies in the region, and further inspire other Arab philanthropists to think and act boldly. ■



# ABDUL AZIZ AL GHURAIR REFUGEE EDUCATION FUND

Building education pathways for 20,000 displaced young people affected by conflict

## Primary philanthropist:

Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair

## Established:

2018

## Primary geography:

Lebanon, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates

## Primary focus:

Education

## REFUGEE CHILDREN ARE FIVE TIMES MORE LIKELY TO GO WITHOUT

an education than non-refugee children.<sup>1</sup> This injustice is true at every stage, but it worsens at higher levels of education: just one percent of young refugee adults attend university, versus a third of all young adults globally.<sup>2</sup> One major reason is a lack of funding for programs that help refugees overcome barriers to education, such as tuition fees, living expenses, and the need to help support their families financially.

Most refugee education is financed through emergency domestic and international budgets, but those funds fall far short of the need.<sup>3</sup> Just two percent of international donors' crisis funding goes to education, and much of that goes to primary education.<sup>4</sup>

"Young people whose education has been interrupted by conflict deserve a chance to rebuild their lives and have a shot at a good future," explained Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair in June 2018.<sup>5</sup> With that vision, Al Ghurair created the USD 27 million Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair Refugee Education Fund ("the Fund") as a way to strategically invest his personal funds. The Fund is managed by the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education, of which he is the chairman, and disburses three-year grants to organizations that help refugees receive quality secondary, tertiary, and vocational educations. The three-year Fund aims to reach 20,000 refugees and conflict-affected youth in Lebanon, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, to provide them with pathways to sustainable livelihoods.

In September 2018, the Refugee Education Fund's first round of grants provided USD 12.3 million to UNICEF Jordan, Luminus Education, Unite Lebanon Youth Project, and Emirates Red Crescent, as well as support for tracking and measuring their impact. These four organizations will collectively serve over 6,500 refugees. UNICEF Jordan, for example, aims to enable more than 4,100 Palestinian and Syrian refugees, as well as at-risk Jordanian youth, to enroll and stay in school or continue on other learning pathways. Luminus Education will support around 1,800 refugee youth in Jordan to access market-driven certificates and diplomas that lead to sustainable livelihoods.

In its next rounds of funding, the Refugee Education Fund will build on lessons from the first round, to enhance its impact. The Fund will prioritize programs that focus on identifying innovative solutions to long-standing challenges in refugee education and that can improve impact at scale at the secondary, vocational and tertiary levels of education. ■





# ALNAHDA SOCIETY

Supporting more than 2,000 people every year to advance their education, careers, and confidence

**Primary philanthropists:**

Local private and corporate donors

**Established:**

1962

**Primary geography:**

Saudi Arabia

**Primary focus:**

Women's empowerment

**WHEN HER ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCESS SARA AL-FAISAL BIN ABD**

Al Aziz established the Alnahda Society in 1962, it became the country's first organization dedicated to advancing women's empowerment. "It used to be taboo to speak about empowering women — it was always about how to 'help' women in poverty," says Fawzia Alrashid, Alnahda's vice president. "Because of our [long track record], we've been able to push the envelope and put a spotlight on issues where others could not."

Over the decades, Alnahda has pioneered efforts to advance women's capacity to help themselves. Its programs equip women with the skills to succeed in the labor market, build their personal networks, and meet with prominent Saudi women who serve as role models.<sup>6</sup>

"Our programs change as women's needs change and the political and social landscape evolves," says Rasha Al-Turki, Alnahda's executive director.

When the society was founded, women's education had only been legal for a few years.<sup>7</sup> Since then, Alnahda has helped women achieve other major milestones, such as the right to work in factories in the 1990s and, more recently, the right to vote and to drive.

A number of prominent, local private and corporate donors fund the organization. The Saudi-based Suliman S. Olayan Foundation, for instance, has provided support for Alnahda's Mustaqbali program, which develops academic and nonacademic supports to help young women, in particular, increase their self-esteem and attain higher education. The project has enrolled 1,220 students since its launch in 2011.

Today, Alnahda remains the largest Saudi organization dedicated to helping people across all strata of society advance their economic and social lives.

It reaches approximately 2,000 Saudi men, women and children annually, offering each of them multiple direct-service programs that focus on improving education, building career and leadership skills, and providing financial supports to those in poverty. The organization reaches additional women through partnership and advocacy efforts, using grassroots approaches to push for policy reform. ■



# BAB RIZQ JAMEEL

Funding programs that have created job opportunities for more than 900,000 marginalized men and women since 2003

## Primary philanthropist:

The Jameel family, through Community Jameel

## Established:

2003

## Primary geography:

Saudi Arabia and Arab World

## Primary focus:

Job opportunities

## OVER SIX MILLION YOUTH (AGED 15 TO 24) ARE UNEMPLOYED IN THE

Arab region, nearly double the global average.<sup>8,9</sup> For the region's girls and young women, finding work is even more of a challenge. Their unemployment rate is about three times higher than the global average for their peers.<sup>10</sup> Community Jameel, a Saudi-based philanthropic initiative established in 2003 by Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel to continue his family's long tradition of giving, seeks to reverse these troubling trends.

"Our focus in Saudi Arabia is job creation through Bab Rizq Jameel's programs," explains Hassan Jameel, president Saudi Arabia, of Community Jameel. "We believe that youth are our future and jobs empower them. From vocational training to financing and recruitment programs, we try to cover the main aspects of the employment spectrum."

Since 2003, BRJ has sought to boost youth employment in Saudi Arabia, and the wider Arab region (including Egypt and Morocco), particularly among women. It has helped more than 900,000 people find jobs, largely by matching qualified candidates with the right opportunities in the private sector. BRJ also helps create new positions by collaborating with large employers, such as the operators of football stadiums. Through this work, BRJ seeks to change mindsets around employment in Saudi Arabia, by encouraging more sectors to employ women and by supporting youth to pursue options they might not traditionally consider, in areas like the hospitality industry. Altogether, these efforts have made BRJ one of the region's largest organizations working to reduce youth unemployment.

BRJ also runs job-training programs that address skill gaps and has supported 25,000 youth to acquire the necessary skills to obtain work. Its Productive Family Program has helped create job opportunities for more than 250,000 women in producing and selling products from their homes. After researching communities' needs, BRJ recently launched a microfinance company. The first company to be licensed by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority for microfinance activities, it aims to finance entrepreneurs through three products: group finance, home business finance, and small business finance including murabaha.<sup>11</sup> "We understand people's needs and consider what ideas will help the economy grow," explains Abdul Rahman Al Fehaid, executive director of BRJ Microfinance. ■



**Primary philanthropist:**

Kamel Lazaar, through the Kamel Lazaar Foundation

**Established:**

2011

**Primary geography:**

Tunisia and the Arab region

**Primary focus:**

Arts and culture

**SINCE 2005, KAMEL LAZAAR HAS SUPPORTED ARTS AND CULTURE**

across the Arab region through his Tunisia-based Kamel Lazaar Foundation (KLF). During the transformations wrought by the Arab Spring in 2011, he felt art had an especially vital role to play. However, back then, there was no platform to bring local and international artists together and help their messages resonate throughout the region and beyond.

"We believe that the visual art from the Middle East deserves to be more accessible, and better researched globally," says his daughter Lina Lazaar, vice president of KLF. "This is only happening because we are able to talk about it in a nuanced way, both within and outside the region."

Seeking to promote the free flow of ideas through images and words, the Lazaars established Ibraaz in 2011. The online forum connects artists, writers, and critical thinkers, and supports artistic research and project development. A core initiative of KLF, Ibraaz is today the world's largest platform focused specifically on Arab arts and culture, with more than 2,000 contributors from across the globe. It has published more than 2,500 unique pieces of online content — from essays and interviews, to visual art, artistic reviews, and books.<sup>12</sup>

Through this work, Ibraaz seeks to fill two key functions in the region. First, it advances regional art by serving as a platform for sharing between artists and those interested in regional art. Ibraaz uses various media to foster free-flowing discussions that link art with social, historical, and political themes. For example, it hosts biannual online discussions on questions such as "what is the future of the arts infrastructure and audiences across North Africa and the Middle East?" Second, Ibraaz helps individuals advance their careers, by showcasing the work of established as well as emerging artists.

"Many of our artists feel empowered to use their Ibraaz content as a portfolio," says Lina. "Oftentimes these conversations and publications lead to further collaborations and full bodies of work."

Ibraaz is expanding its strategy to include up to four in-person symposiums annually, to strengthen connections between readers and contributors in the region, and to give artists additional venues to feature their work.

"We now have a conviction that we should ensure the online platform's works are translated into concrete implementation on the ground," concludes Kamel Lazaar. "In the Arab World, what better place to do this than in Tunisia, which has a history of critical and free thinking, as well as a commitment to social development." ■





Creating a global network to help educate and empower 2,000 Syrian children and youth annually

## Primary philanthropists:

Foundations and individual donors, often Syrian diaspora

## Established:

2011

## Primary geography:

Syria and Syrian refugee-hosting countries

## Primary focus:

Education

## BEFORE THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR BEGAN IN 2011, AN ESTIMATED 97

percent of the country's children attended primary school.<sup>13</sup> By 2013, violence in the hardest-hit areas had caused school attendance to plummet to 30 percent. This collapse presents an undeniable crisis for Syria's next generation.<sup>14</sup> Some estimate at least 100,000 university-qualified students are now refugees.<sup>15</sup>

In 2011, when a group of Syrian expatriates traveled to Syria and saw firsthand the large number of youth with untapped potential but no access to quality educations, they decided to act. The expats launched Jusoor, which seeks to use the collective power of the large Syrian diaspora to help Syrian youth attain quality educations in top institutions.

"Jusoor started with a mentoring program over Skype, to share higher education opportunities with youth and help them navigate the application process and various academic fields," explains Grace Atkinson, Jusoor's executive director.

Over the ensuing years, Jusoor expanded, and now reaches over 2,000 children and youth annually, 75 percent of whom are refugees. The organization administers a scholarship fund that has sent over 700 Syrian students to international universities, including its flagship 100 Syrian women, 10,000 Syrian lives program to support women with leadership potential. Through its Refugee Education Program, it serves around 1,200 children in Lebanon per year, enabling them to successfully transition to public schools. Lastly, Jusoor runs a youth entrepreneurship program, which in 2019 trained over 500 Syrians and provided USD 150,000 in seed funding.

What began as a small effort among friends has become a global movement, spearheaded by Syrians living abroad and supported by eight board members and a team of staff. Today, Jusoor's total network has reached more than 130,000 individuals, including youth living in Syria and in neighboring countries as refugees, as well as individuals who contribute their time and money. Included in this network are over 220 volunteers who mentor youth, provide administrative support, and work in Jusoor's schools.

In 2019, Jusoor raised USD 1.7 million, primarily from Syrians committed to supporting youth education. This included donations of under USD 5,000 each from more than 3,500 individuals, as well as contributions of over USD 20,000 each from more than 20 foundations and philanthropists.<sup>16</sup>

Looking ahead, Jusoor plans to expand its network and programs, such as growing the Jusoor Entrepreneurship Program in the MENA region and bringing its Career Development Program fully online. By doing so, it is investing in innovative and sustainable ways to empower Syrian youth to build a brighter future for their country. ■



# UNITE LEBANON YOUTH PROJECT

Supporting diverse programs that help marginalized children and women build pathways out of poverty

**Primary philanthropists:**

Arab institutional funders, individual Palestinian philanthropists, and international funders

**Established:**

2010

**Primary geography:**

Lebanon

**Primary sector:**

Education

**NEARLY ONE OUT OF EVERY FIVE PEOPLE IN LEBANON IS A REFUGEE**

from Syria or Palestine.<sup>17</sup> The vast majority live in poverty, and the next generation's chances of climbing out of it are bleak, as more than half of refugee children (aged three to 18) are out of school.<sup>18</sup>

Girls and young women face additional challenges, as there are wide gender gaps in access to health care, labor markets, and education throughout the country.<sup>19</sup>

Led by the guiding principle that the least fortunate have an equal right to fulfill their potential, philanthropist Melek El Nimer established Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP) in 2010. ULYP works to empower the country's marginalized populations by offering education and skills training to children as young as five years of age, youth, and women, so they can build pathways out of poverty.

The organization offers over 10 diverse programs that combat these communities' varied challenges. One of ULYP's programs, *Bridge*, focuses on older youth who are attempting to successfully transition from secondary school to university. *Bridge* offers scholarships, a university preparatory course, and counseling to ensure that secondary students in marginalized communities can not only access higher education, but also study and succeed in premier universities around the world. To date, it has reached more than 1,000 students; over 600 have graduated from top universities in Lebanon (including 250 from the American University of Beirut) and abroad.

ULYP recently created a two-year preparatory program, *Change*, which exclusively supports secondary school students who are refugees from Syria. Through an intensive English-language course, as well as courses on analytical thinking and soft skills, *Change* increases the odds that Syria's young refugees can thrive in Lebanon's schools and universities, which primarily teach in English. The program, whose slogan is "Change starts with education," serves around 300 youth.

ULYP designs these and other programs based on need, and draws on distinct global funding streams to finance them. Supporters include a range of prominent Arab institutional funders, universities, international foundations, governments and individual donors.<sup>20</sup>

Since the organization's inception, its various programs have supported over 20,000 marginalized people in Lebanon. At a time when surging refugee populations are overwhelming educational systems in the Arab region, ULYP continues to explore different pathways for providing life-changing educational support to the most marginalized. ■





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## APPENDIX: REFERENCES

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- <sup>10</sup> "Unemployment, female (% of female labor force) (modeled ILO estimate)," The World Bank, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS?view=chart>. Female unemployment rates are lower, but relative rates are worse. "Arab World" rate is 18.9 percent vs. global average of 6 percent
- <sup>11</sup> Murabaha financing is used in place of loans, which are prohibited under Sharia law. It is also known as "cost-plus financing" because the value of an item is marked up for purchase and not fully owned until the full amount has been paid by the buyer.
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