The Significance of AI Policies and Regulations on Fostering a Sustainable Educational Landscape in the Middle East

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Abstract:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) regulations play a crucial role in public international law by establishing a robust legal framework across nations. In the Middle East, strict rules on AI implementation are necessary to develop privacy laws that specifically cater to the region's needs.

This study focuses on AI policies in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, with a particular emphasis on their impact on education sustainability. The study analyzes hard and soft law approaches and their implications for technology use within the academic community. The findings reveal a significant gap in the existing legal framework for AI in education, providing straightforward insights into future strategies for fostering sustainable education in the region.

Keywords: AI regulations; Middle East; education sustainability.
JEL Classification Codes: I20, I23, I28, K33, K38.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Dartmouth Conference of 1956 marked a turning point in the history of AI. It was an essential gathering where researchers from various disciplines united to explore the potential of computers in developing algorithms for thinking machines. AI has evolved dramatically to compete with human emotions, thoughts, and actions.

The AI research community is expanding at an unprecedented rate, as AI applications are increasingly dominating several sectors, especially in industry and academia. This surge in AI technology is vital for revolutionizing various aspects of our lives.

Today, numerous examples showcase AI's ability to tackle complex problems and effectively address real-world challenges. Furthermore, the rising demand for AI stems from its striking resemblance to human intelligence which reinforces its significance in our society. However, this close relationship between the intelligent robot and humans triggered a series of ethical issues (Cao, 2017, p. 703).

AI risks are significant and multifaceted, encompassing ethical, privacy, and security risks that pose a direct threat to the stability and safety of humanity, with the potential to lead to human extinction. Tamburrini (2023) thoroughly examined the risks of AI to human well-being arguing that, it is an ethical, social, and political responsibility to develop AI for the flourishing and persistence of human civilizations, for protecting humanity from man-made large-scale threats, and for reducing AI’s role in their buildup (p. 251).

AI policies have emerged as a central theme in international discourse. Many nations are engaged in developing regulations and ethical guidelines to mitigate risks while harnessing the transformative power of AI. Several legal frameworks introduced by the United States, The United Kingdom, the European Union, Canada, and China present cohesive strategies for the effective implementation and governance of AI technologies.

This study sheds light on AI policies in the Middle East region, with a particular focus on the education sector. Given the rapid advancement of AI in Middle Eastern countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, it is crucial to establish codes of ethics and regulations governing the use of AI in educational settings. This will ensure that AI is used ethically, inclusively, and

equitably in education (Fengchun et al., 2021). However, efforts to implement legal AI use in education in the Middle East are insufficient. Currently, there is no Middle East or United Gulf strategy on AI or related data sharing. Individual countries in the region do not have any laws or regulations that specifically address AI (Law Business Research, 2021). In this context, the present study explores the following questions:

1.Are there international regulations governing the use of AI?
2.Do countries have the power to implement their own AI laws?
3.What are the regulations pertaining to AI in the educational landscape of the Middle East?

2. Literature Review

Autonomy is a fundamental concept that shapes our understanding of both natural intelligence and AI. The key difference between the two lies in their ability to act independently. The term 'autonomy' is rooted in the Greek language, deriving from the words 'auto', meaning self, and 'namos', meaning law. The traditional meaning of autonomy highlighted people's freedom and their ability to govern themselves by establishing their own rules and guiding principles, free from external pressure. In the age of digitalization, individuals' autonomy extends beyond the simple ability to act independently to include other acts, such as thinking critically, making informed decisions and assuming moral responsibility (Beghili et al., 2025).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines human autonomy as the right to make personal choices and decisions without any interference or coercion from others. Article 5 asserts the importance of individual autonomy in decision-making, emphasizing that individuals must take full responsibility for their choices while also respecting the autonomy of others. Autonomy is a term that explicitly refers to the ability to reason, which is universally recognized as the foundation of personhood. According to Morrison and Navarro (2014), autonomy refers to individual's self-organized, voluntary and authentic behaviors. Lack of autonomy is evident in the pressures and actions influenced by external factors.

AI autonomy refers to the ability of AI systems to execute tasks and make decisions independently without human intervention. Boothby (2025) explained AI autonomy as "the absence of human intervention and control during the entire process of executing a task" (p. 423). The cognitive brain is the driving force behind all forms of intelligence. AI systems have demonstrated high cognitive abilities, such as perception, recognition, and translation, which resemble human mental processes. This raises important questions about which aspects of international law enable AI to replicate and compete with human intelligence, and how international law governs the use of AI.

AI laws and regulations were first established by Isaac Asimov in 1942 through his Three Laws of Robotics which maintain that 1) A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. 2) A robot must obey orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. 3) A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

AI laws can be categorized into two primary types: soft and hard. Soft AI laws are non-binding standards, often referred to as codes of conduct, declarations, or guidelines, tailored to the specific needs of private, academic, and public sectors. They are established on a voluntary basis and are intended to have a nominal effect. AI soft laws are open to discussion and interpretation and do not carry legal penalties (Leslie et al., 2021).

A clear distinction exists between soft law mechanisms that address specific sector needs and the goals they aim to achieve (Wallach et al., 2023). Examples of AI-related soft law include the 'Robot Ethics Charter", initiated by the South Korean government in 2007, and the 'Partnership on AI', founded by prominent companies such as Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and Apple. This partnership aims to establish best practices and promote research on the benefits of AI for individuals and society (Marchant, 2019).

AI hard laws are international regulations that mandate the responsible use of AI. Unlike soft laws, AI hard laws are legally binding and can be upheld through litigation and court proceedings (Leslie, et al., 2021). AI treaties, agreements, charts and acts establish a definitive framework for rights and obligations that ensures international order and security. Nations that fail to

comply will face enforceable sanctions. Key AI hard laws shaping international landscape include the EU AI Act 2024/1689 from the European Parliament, Canada's Bill C-27, the United States' Executive Order 14110 focused on the safe, secure, and trustworthy development and use of AI, and the UK's AI Regulation White Paper consultation from March 2023.

Several nations have implemented AI regulations to organize and control its use across various sectors assertively. The USA, Canada and UK have led the way in establishing international regulations of AI that govern the global application of AI, alongside imposing global penalties for violations. In parallel, the UAE, China, and African Union countries are prioritizing soft laws that emphasize safe and ethical use of AI (see table 1). Within the Arab world, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are taking the lead in adopting and advancing AI technologies.

Table 1. Classification of AI laws

Country		**AI Hard Law**	**AI Soft Law**
USA		X	X
CANADA		X	X
UNITED KINGDOM		X	X
EU		X	X
INDIA		X	X
UAE (Middle East countries)			X
CHINA			X
KOREA			X
SINGAPORE			X
AUSTRALIA			X
AFRICAN UNION			X

Microsoft has established six essential ethical standards, known as AI principles, that govern the lifecycle of AI systems by “keeping humans at the center and guided by our principles” (Microsoft.com). These principles are:

Fairness: ensuing fair and non-biased use of AI representative to all social categories regardless of age, gender, race, religion etc.

Privacy and Security: safe use of AI systems and data confidentiality are deemed essential to avoid different types of harm including financial, professional and psychological.

Reliability and safety: Through this principle, AI systems should function under a variety of conditions to mitigate the risks of AI use on society and individuals.

Transparency: AI systems should be built with high level of clarity and expandability to maintain trust in AI systems.

Accountability: sustaining the use of AI systems by ensuring a good performance of AI systems and their potential impact on individuals and societies.

Inclusiveness: AI systems should be accessible and useable by diverse groups.

3. AI Laws and Regulations in Middle East Countries

Despite widespread implementation of AI in Middle Eastern countries, its integration remains critical in light of the cultural, economic and political specificities of the region that impose careful use of AI among the national institutions mainly educational institutions where the implementation of AI must be governed by strict regulations that control students' access and usage of AI regarding their age, level and academic needs.

Peets et al. (2022) maintained that there are only national initiatives in the Middle East to elevate AI implementation in individual countries; however, reality highlighted the need for a united Gulf strategy that communicates laws and regulations specifically addressing AI. In the same vein, Mayank Dhingra, Senior Education Business Leader, stated that schools in the Middle East rightfully worried about the correct ethical practices around AI usage.

This paper examines the legal framework governing AI implementation in Middle Eastern countries. It focuses on three key policies: Saudi Arabia's AI educational policy, Qatar's National AI Strategy, and the UAE's National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence. The study aims to illuminate the complexities of AI regulations within the education sector and to evaluate how effectively these policies manage the integration of AI in academic institutions.

3.1. Saudi Arabia's AI Educational Policy

In the Saudi Arabian educational landscape, AI is governed by the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA), a regulatory body that is directly linked to the Prime Minister. SDAIA plays a significant role in ensuring that educational institutions comply with standards that encourage the responsible use of AI. It operates through three sub-entities: the National Information Center, the National Data Management Office and the National Center for AI. SDAIA's main responsibility is to enhance educational quality while protecting individual privacy within the educational system by adhering to the local data protection laws that align with domestic standards and policies (The Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations Office, 2024).

The Personal Data Protection Law (PDPL), enacted in September 2023, serves as a soft law that regulates data utilization by encouraging ethical standards and building trust among stakeholders. The PDPL aligns with international AI principles to safeguard the data of students and staff. This law comprises 43 articles that delineate the rights associated with AI usage, data handling procedures, as well as penalties and restrictions.

The national framework for AI education in Saudi Arabia, initiated by the national center of e-learning, is the foundational step towards the creation of soft laws for the deployment of AI in the educational sector. This framework adopts an inclusive approach to AI that engages parents, teachers, and students in the development of internal regulations for AI usage in educational institutions. Saudi Arabia's inclusive strategy for AI seeks to promote the principles of transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in the implementation of AI policies within the educational sector.

The integration of AI is tailored to match the cognitive levels of each grade. While K-12 education aims to provide insights into AI applications without introducing overwhelming complexity, secondary school curricula encompass AI and data science by exploring areas such as machine learning and deep learning. In higher education, the integration of AI prioritizes the learning outcomes associated with each qualification, taking into account students' understanding of AI, the cognitive and communicative skills they should enhance while employing AI tools, in addition to their ethical values and responsibilities regarding the use of AI tools (Saudi Data and AI Authority, 2023).

The Saudi Academic Framework for AI Qualifications (2023-2024) was authorized by SDAIA to fulfill two main objectives:

1. Serve as a guideline for the development, evaluation, and accreditation of higher education programs in AI.
2. Contribute to establishing minimum curricular requirements for higher education programs in the field of AI (Saudi Data and AI Authority, 2023).

The framework includes six qualification titles aimed at promoting educational intelligence. These include: associate diploma, intermediate/advanced diploma, Bachelor Degree (AI Program/AI track), Higher Diploma (specialists/non-specialists), Master's degree, and Doctoral degree. The AI track associated with each degree is defined by a particular type of AI knowledge and skills, which include cognitive skills as well as communication and information technology skills appropriate for each degree, in addition to AI values, responsibility, and autonomy (Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority, 2023). Examples of the knowledge units for bachelor and master degrees are illustrates below.

	Knowledge Units	الوحدات المعرفية الأساسية
1	Linear Algebra	الجبر الخطي
2	Discrete Math	الرياضيات المتقطعة
3	Probability and Statistics	الإحصاء والاحتمالات
4	Calculus	التفاضل والتكامل
5	Introduction to programming	مقدمة في البرمجة
6	Object-oriented programming	البرمجة الشيئية
7	Design and Analysis of Algorithms	تصميم وتحليل الخوارزميات
8	Data Structures	هياكل البيانات
9	Introduction to Databases	مقدمة إلى قواعد البيانات
10	Introduction to AI	أساسيات الذكاء الاصطناعي
11	Introduction to Machine Learning	مقدمة في تعلم الآلة
12	Deep learning	التعلم العميق
13	Knowledge based reasoning and representation	التمثيل والاستدلال في الذكاء الاصطناعي
14	Planning, Searching, and Scheduling	التخطيط والبحث والجدولة
15	Optimization	خوارزميات التحسين
16	Intelligent Agents	العملاء الأذكياء
17	Data analysis and Visualization	تحليل وتصوير البيانات
18	NLP	معالجة اللغة الطبيعية
19	Computer Vision	الرؤية الحاسوبية
20	Robotics and Automation	الروبوتات
21	Ethics	أخلاقيات الذكاء الاصطناعي
22	Internship	فترة التدريب

	Knowledge Units	الوحدات المعرفية الأساسية
1	Complete all basic knowledge units for the undergraduate level	إكمال جميع الوحدات المعرفية الأساسية لمرحلة البكالوريوس
2	Design and Analysis of Algorithms	تصميم وتحليل الخوارزميات
3	Advanced topics in Artificial Intelligence	مواضيع متقدمة في الذكاء الاصطناعي
4	Advanced topics in Machine Learning	مواضيع متقدمة في تعلم الآلة
5	Advanced topics in one of the following: Computer vision, Robotics, NLP.	مواضيع متقدمة في إحدى الوحدات التالية: الرؤية الحاسوبية -الروبوتات - معالجة اللغة الطبيعية
6	Project Management	إدارة المشاريع
7	Project (Research or capstone)	إتمام رسالة أو مشروع حول موضوع في الذكاء الاصطناعي

Source: Saudi Data and AI Authority, 2023, 41-42

3.2. Qatar's National AI Strategy

The Qatar National AI Strategy is grounded in the AI=X paradigm, a transformative approach that incorporates AI across different sectors including health, entertainment, business, education, and research. AI education is now an essential component of the curriculum at all educational levels and across all disciplines. Qatar proudly leads in internet usage rates, with over 94% of its population actively using the internet.

The National AI Strategy of Qatar is built upon six pillars that are essential for the advancement and execution of AI in the country. The foremost pillar is centered on education and training dedicated to promoting AI literacy at different educational levels by creating specialized curricula that cater to the needs of students at various academic levels.

The AI+X Paradigm ensures a rational use of AI in educational institutions. At the K-12 level, younger students learn to navigate recommendations from AI. In other words, students learn the basics of AI usage.

Meanwhile, older students should understand the technical and philosophical aspects of AI. AI education at the University level includes professional learning courses and online training for teachers, as well as AI bootcamps for individuals working in AI-related jobs (Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2019).

The general AI policy for teaching and coursework in Qatar defines the obligations that both teachers and students must adhere to when utilizing AI tools. The NU-Q Academic Integrity Committee (2024) outlined three responsibilities for instructors: 1) Teachers must explicitly outline their AI policies in syllabi and ensure they are discussed in class. 2) They determine their course approach, which may involve a closed approach where AI is not allowed as it does not meet the course's learning goals, a conditional approach that permits AI use by the instructor for specific assignments, or an open approach that allows students to use AI under the instructor's supervision. 3) The last responsibility requires teachers to set guidelines for AI use and citation.

Students are expected to comply with the instructors' AI policies and must disclose any use of AI when citing generative AI. Also, students must ensure that their use of AI is reasonable and does not undermine their writing and research skills. They should also engage in critical thinking regarding the future implications of AI use.

NU-Q Academic Integrity Committee further delineates the consequences of academic integrity and violations as follows:

- Failure to properly disclose and cite AI use when permitted, is considered a violation of the Northwestern Qatar Academic Integrity Policy.
- Instructors' who violate AI policy should follow the established procedures for reporting academic integrity violations at NU-Q.
- Violations of this policy will be treated according to NU-Q's existing academic integrity procedures.
- Potential consequences for violations may include, but are not limited to:
    a. Receiving a failing grade on the assignment.
    b. Receiving a failing grade for the course.
    c. Referral to the appropriate academic integrity committee or disciplinary body.

d. other sanctions as deemed appropriate by the instructor or academic integrity committee.

- Students are encouraged to consult with their instructors if they are unsure about the appropriate use of generative AI in their coursework.

3.3. United Arab Emirates AI Legal Framework in Education

The UAE's AI legal framework in education is marked by three landmark events, starting with the launch of free education in government schools for both males and females in 1972, followed by the implementation of smart classes in educational institutions in 2012, and culminating in the implementation of a distance education system in 2020.

The UAE has enacted some regulations related to the application of AI across different sectors including:

- Federal Decree Law No. 45 of 2021 regarding the Protection of Personal Data.
- Data Protection Law, DIFC Law No 5 of 2020- Dubai International Financial Centre.
- Federal Law No. 2 of 2019 concerning the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Health Fields.
- Protecting data and privacy online, Law No. 34 of 2021: Law on combatting rumors and cybercrimes.
- Internet Access Management (IAM) policy: Impersonation, fraud, phishing, or privacy invasion can be reported to Etisalat and Du for removal.
- Electronic Transactions and Trust Services law: Regulating e-Transactions, e-Documents and e-Signatures, and e-Seals.
- The UAE's Constitution: Article 31: Freedom of communication by means of post, telegraph or other means of communication.

Upon reviewing this comprehensive list of legislations, it becomes clear that there are no specific laws governing the application of AI in the education sector. The only law that is relevant across all sectors, including education, is the DIFC (Dubai International Financial Centre) Data Protection Law of 2020, which serves two key purposes:

1. Provide standards and controls for the processing and free movement of personal data by a Controller or Processor; and
2. Protect the fundamental rights of Data Subjects, including how such rights apply to the protection of Personal Data in emerging technologies (Dubai International Financial Centre Authority, 2020).

The DIFC Data Protection Law applies to all individuals, regardless of gender, and to both individual and group users. Educational institutions should adhere to this law to safeguard the privacy of students and instructors by 1) securing data storage, 2) limiting access to individuals who are authorized to use this data, and 3) ensuring data transparency.

The application of DIFC Law 2020 is significantly limited as it does not include specific laws relevant to educational institutions in the UAE. While Article 38 (4) of the DIFC Law 2020 addresses the rights of minors concerning automated decision-making, it does not encompass the data of children. Moreover, the absence of regulations governing instructors' access to student data raises the potential risks of utilizing AI in educational settings. Furthermore, the law does not permit the processing of data for scientific research. There are no protocols within the law that outline how such data should be managed, disseminated, or protected in the context of academic research (OneTrust DataGuidanceTM, nd.).

Overall, the UAE lacks a comprehensive standalone data protection law for the education sector. The educational institutions in the UAE must implement more precise laws to safeguard student privacy and protect their data (Alqodsi et al., 2024).

The UAE’s national strategy for Artificial Intelligence 2031 identifies eight strategic objectives for the substantial implementation of AI. The UAE’s 2031 AI vision aims to establish the UAE as one of the leading nations in AI by testing and developing AI-driven solutions. The strategy seeks to capture the global market by building strong brand through targeted AI initiatives (Objective 1). It also boosts the UAE's competitive assets through key agreements in vital sectors, including the economy and industry (Objective 2). The strategy further aims to cultivate a robust domestic AI ecosystem by creating a collaborative network of researchers, industry experts, and policymakers. This network focuses on evaluating and implementing new

infrastructure (Objective 3). (UAE National Program for Artificial Intelligence, 2018).

Objective 4 focuses on enhancing customer service by addressing key public challenges, such as traffic fatalities and educational outcomes. The UAE's vision for 2031 prioritizes public AI training to equip workers with essential digital skills and enable them to solve workplace problems using advanced technologies. Objective 6 emphasizes investment in research and encourages leading academics to work in the UAE, highlighting the importance of universities and partnerships in AI research. Additionally, the strategy promotes international dialogue on the responsible use of AI to enhance its application and training (UAE National Program for Artificial Intelligence, 2018).

All the objectives mentioned earlier cannot be achieved without strong governance and effective regulation of AI, which are essential for creating a legitimate AI environment. The UAE Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain Council will assess national strategies for AI implementation, focusing on data management, ethics, and cybersecurity. The key requirements for Objective 8 are as follows:

- Creating a legal environment to support innovation in general and the adoption of AI in particular.
- Review the latest international best practices in legislation and global risks from AI to develop a legal AI Strategy in the UAE.
- Developing legislation that responds to changes in the world. (UAE National Program for Artificial Intelligence, 2018).

4. Conclusion

This literature review study provides a comprehensive understanding of the legal framework for implementing AI in the Middle East. Important conclusions have been drawn regarding the implementation of AI in educational institutions in some Middle East countries, mainly in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, as well as the regulations governing the use of AI in schools and Universities.

Analysis shows that the AI principles in most Middle East countries are still in draft form and do not yet have legal force in the educational landscape. The future visions for AI implementation in Middle Eastern countries underscore the need to develop a legal framework for AI use in academic institutions, aiming for educational sustainability and credible research.

It is evident that a majority of nations in the Middle East are adopting soft laws for AI that do not have legal enforcement. However, soft laws should be paired with the legal force of hard laws to effectively govern AI usage among stakeholders, teachers, students and administrative staff. This combination is essential for ensuring privacy in the educational sector, especially regarding the unauthorized use of student records or access to their personal information.

The study reveals considerable ambiguity regarding AI regulations in the education sector. Ambiguity arises from current legal frameworks that do not sufficiently address the specific challenges that AI presents in this context. Consequently, educational institutions may find it challenging to interpret these regulations, which could lead to issues that hinder the implementation of AI in teaching and learning.

It is essential to acknowledge that the Middle East is currently facing a challenge in the absence of a unified legal framework for AI. This lack of cohesion hinders the development and implementation of AI technologies across the region. Without a well-crafted legal framework, stakeholders, such as governments, businesses, instructors, and researchers, may struggle to navigate the complexities of AI deployment. As a result, potential ethical concerns, security risks, and missed opportunities for innovation will be faced.

Recommendations

Despite the dedicated efforts of Middle Eastern governments to establish a legal framework for the use of AI in educational institutions, a significant legal gap arises in the actual implementation of such technologies, which may lead to substantial deviations in the application of AI within the academic community. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the review of AI laws and regulations in the Middle East:

1. Establishing a unified legal framework specifically for Middle Eastern countries.

2. To effectively regulate AI in education, it is important to combine soft laws that promotes ethical practices with hard laws that ensure the legal execution of AI regulations in schools and universities.
3. Instructors and students must be thoroughly acquainted with these regulations and the penalties for violating them.
4. The EU AI Act's risk-based approach must be customized for the Middle East, addressing AI risks in education while considering cultural, religious, and political factors.
5. AI regulations in the education sector must be established based on surveys and long-term studies that thoroughly examine the various factors influencing AI implementation in schools and universities. These findings will be crucial in shaping effective plans.

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