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When Metrics Matter Too Much: How Visibility Pressures Undermine MENA Research Integrity

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ABSTRACT

The global research ecosystem increasingly depends on visibility metrics-such as indexing status, impact factors, and citation counts-to evaluate scholarly output. While these benchmarks provide measurable standards, they disproportionately disadvantage researchers and journals from underrepresented regions, particularly the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This article argues that metric-driven publishing norms reinforce structural barriers linked to limited infrastructure, linguistic challenges, and editorial biases, leaving regionally significant research undervalued and often invisible in global discourse. It further highlights pathways to greater inclusion, including capacity building, multilingual publishing, and regional-global indexing integration. The article calls for a reorientation from metric-centric validation toward a balanced model that recognizes both global visibility and local relevance, thereby fostering knowledge equity and advancing the decolonization of scholarly communication.

KEYWORDS

MENA research, visibility metrics, research integrity, academic publishing, indexing barriers, Arabic-language journals, scholarly communication, regional inclusion, global citation bias, multilingual publishing, research infrastructure, policy gaps, academic marginalization, open science, ARCIF, ISC

INTRODUCTION

Global conversations in academia often emphasize principles of openness, inclusivity, and diversity[1]. Yet the systems used to evaluate and recognize scholarly contributions, including indexing platforms and impact metrics, frequently marginalize regional research environments[2]. These systems tend to prioritize publications from well-resourced institutions and regions with established infrastructure, predominantly favoring English-language outputs and journals indexed in high-impact global databases. This creates an uneven playing field, where valuable research from underrepresented regions struggles for recognition despite its local relevance and rigor.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region with an active and evolving research landscape, scholars and journals face mounting pressure to meet global visibility standards[3,4]. This pressure often compels researchers to conform to publication norms that may not align with regional priorities, languages, or contexts, risking the marginalization of locally important knowledge. Furthermore, infrastructural gaps, limited access to indexing tools, and linguistic barriers exacerbate these challenges, hindering the integration of MENA research into the global academic ecosystem.

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This article presents a perspective on how the over-reliance on visibility metrics such as impact factors and indexing status creates systemic disadvantages for researchers in the MENA region[5]. It highlights region-specific constraints and proposes constructive steps to build a more inclusive and context-aware scholarly ecosystem that values diversity in languages, methodologies, and research impact.

WHEN METRICS OVERSHADOW MEANING

Global academia is increasingly governed by metrics. Indicators such as the Journal Impact Factor (JIF) (Clarivate), Scopus CiteScore (Elsevier), and Google Scholar h-index are frequently used to assess researchers, journals, and institutions[5]. While these tools provide quantifiable benchmarks, they often act as gatekeepers, privileging certain languages, publication models, and regions over others[6].

For MENA-based researchers and journals, this results in pressure to publish in internationally indexed venues[3]. Context-specific studies, such as those focused on drought response in rural Sudan or education access in Yemen, may be under-prioritized due to their perceived limited global citation appeal[7].

This overemphasis on visibility-driven metrics risks diverting the focus from scholarly relevance and rigor to numerical performance, thereby undermining research integrity and local impact.

Similar concerns were echoed in a recent global survey by the Asian Council of Science Editors, which revealed how mounting publication pressure linked to metrics can compromise research integrity and distort academic priorities[8].

WHY MENA STRUGGLES IN THE METRICS RACE

The MENA researchers face two challenges: Striving for global recognition while navigating regional limitations. While research output in MENA has grown significantly, according to the UNESCO Science Report 2021, the region's share of global scientific publications increased from approximately 25,000 articles in 2005 (1.2%) to around 60,000 articles in 2018 (2.4%). Despite this near doubling, the infrastructure supporting internationally visible research remains uneven across countries, limiting global recognition of much of this work[9].

Key limitations include:

- Limited access to high-quality research infrastructure[10]
- Uneven research funding across institutions[11]
- Barriers to publishing in English-language, high-impact journals[12]

In many institutions, particularly in North African and conflict-affected countries, the absence of institutional repositories, journal management systems, and reliable internet access further restricts participation in global publishing ecosystems.

Infrastructure gap

Digital tools and indexing access: Access to indexing and visibility begins with infrastructure. Tools such as DOI assignment via Crossref, manuscript management systems like OJS (PKP), and standardized metadata (e.g., JATS XML) are essential for journals aiming for Scopus or Web of Science inclusion[13].

While countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia have invested in national research portals and digital publication platforms, many institutions across MENA lack the funding or training to implement these tools[13]. For example, without DOI registration or automated metadata syndication, a peer-reviewed journal, even if academically rigorous, may not be eligible for indexing[14].

Language and local relevance

Multilingual disconnect: Arabic remains a dominant language in the region, especially in the social sciences and humanities. However, major indexing platforms like Scopus and Web of Science predominantly index English-language journals[15].

Organizations such as AlManhal and Marefa aggregate Arabic scholarly content, but these databases are not integrated into global citation systems. As a result, high-quality Arabic-language studies remain largely invisible to international audiences[16].

This issue was highlighted in the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021), which advocates for multilingualism and diversity in knowledge systems as essential to equitable science[17].

This underrepresentation of Arabic and other regional languages in global citation systems not only limits discoverability but also raises broader issues of knowledge equity and cultural diversity in science, principles strongly emphasized by the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021). Embracing multilingualism is essential to creating a truly inclusive and equitable scholarly ecosystem.

As recently argued in a Scholarly Kitchen commentary, the structural exclusion of Arabic-language journals from global indexing systems has left much of MENA's scholarly output 'invisible by design,' underscoring the urgency of reforming integration pathways[18].

EDITORIAL PRACTICES AND CONTEXTUAL BARRIERS

Many journals across MENA are locally respected and follow standard peer review practices. However, without tools like ORCID integration, Crossmark, or COPE-compliant editorial workflows, they are often excluded from international indexing. Recent discussions on peer review reform also highlight how integrating digital tools and AI-assisted workflows could help regional journals enhance transparency and meet global editorial standards[19].

Table 1: Comparative landscape of global, regional, and national visibility systems supporting MENA research

Platform/Body	Coverage/Focus	Language support	Interoperability with global Indexes
Scopus/Web of science	Global, High-Impact Journals Across Disciplines	Primarily English	High-widely integrated
ARCIF (Arab citation and impact factor)	Arab World Journals	Arabic, English	Low–medium-limited export to global indexes
ISC (Islamic world science Citation center)	Islamic Region Journals	Arabic, English	Low-limited international uptake
AlManhal/Marefa	Arabic-Language Local Journals and Publications	Arabic	None-not integrated with global indexes
IMEMR (Index medicus for Eastern mediterranean region)	Health Science Journals in the Eastern Mediterranean	Arabic, English and French	Low-integrated via WHO but not in commercial indexes
GIM (Global index medicus)	Non-MEDLINE Health Journals Across the WHO Regions	Multilingual	Low-operates separately within the WHO ecosystem
ASJP (Algerian scientific Journal platform)	Aggregates Algerian Scholarly Journals Across all Disciplines	Arabic, French, and some English	Low-primarily national
Egypt's supreme council of universities (Journal accreditation)	Accredits Egyptian Academic Journals	Arabic, English	Low-accreditation used for promotion, not indexing
Iran's MSRT journal evaluation	National Journal Ranking and Accreditation	Persian, English	Low-national scope, not embedded in global indexes
India's UGC CARE List	Approved Journals List for Indian Academics	English, some regional languages	Medium-overlaps with Scopus/WoS, but not automatic

Interoperability ratings (High, Medium, Low) indicate the degree to which a platform's indexed journals are discoverable or automatically integrated into major global databases such as scopus or web of science, High: Broad and automated integration, Medium: Partial overlap or selective inclusion and Low: Minimal or no direct integration

Local and regional initiatives, such as ARCIF (Arab citation and impact factor), the Islamic world science citation center (ISC), Index Medicus for the Eastern Mediterranean Region (IMEMR), and national accreditation systems like Algeria's ASJP, Egypt's Supreme Council of Universities, and Iran's MSRT journal evaluation, are emerging to s trengthen regional visibility and provide quality metrics aligned with local priorities. However, the limited interoperability of these platforms with major global indexes means much regional research remains "invisible" to the wider scholarly community. Similar efforts, including the global index medicus (GIM) and India's UGC CARE List, illustrate varied approaches to bridging these visibility gaps worldwide[20].

Table 1 summarizes major global, regional, and national indexing or accreditation platforms relevant to MENA, outlining their scope, language support, and degree of interoperability with leading global indexing systems such as Scopus and Web of Science. While these initiatives enhance discoverability within their target regions, their limited integration with international databases continues to constrain global recognition.

Have begun to strengthen regional visibility and provide quality metrics aligned with regional priorities.(20) However, their lack of interoperability with major indexing services like Scopus or Web of Science limits global recognition[21].

REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN RESEARCH STAYS HIDDEN

The exclusion of MENA research from global indexes has significant consequences that directly reflect the infrastructure and indexing challenges described below[22]:

- **Funding challenges:** Many international grants require indexed publications as eligibility criteria
- **Policy gaps:** Research on issues like maternal health, education, or climate adaptation, published in local journals, often fails to reach global NGOs and policymakers
- **Academic marginalization:** Faculty promotions, international conference invitations, and collaboration opportunities are often tied to visibility in recognized databases

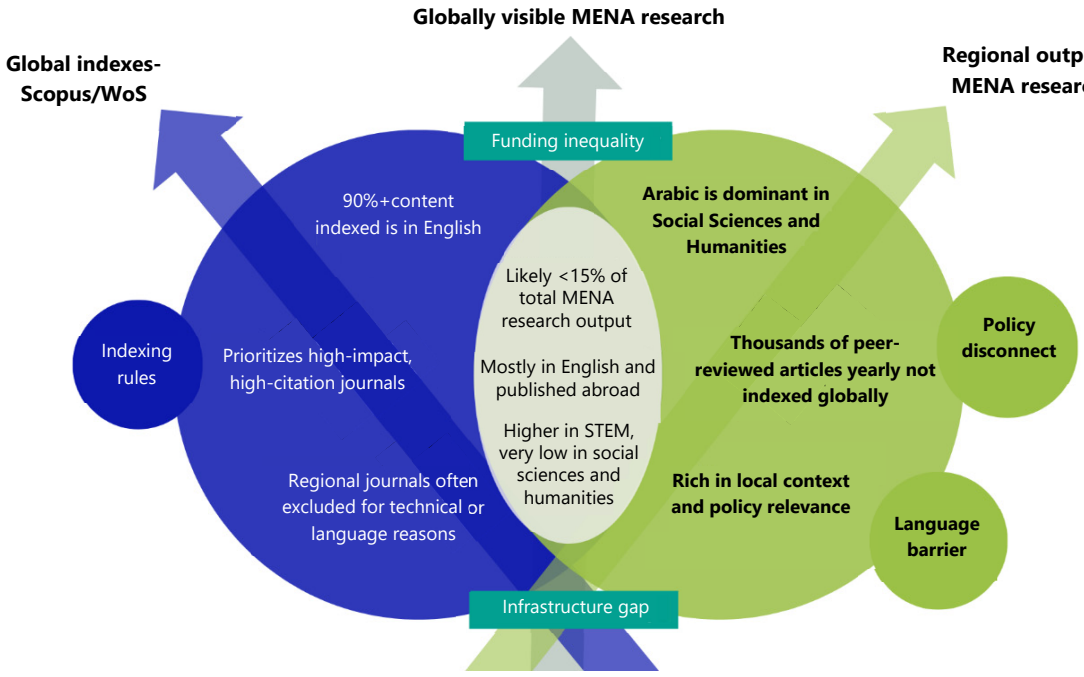

Fig. 1: Visibility gap for MENA research

Most regional outputs remain outside global indexes due to systemic barriers such as language, infrastructure, indexing rules, funding inequities, and policy disconnects

For instance, a 2022 open-access study conducted by a Libyan Usniversity medical faculty detailing maternal health barriers in conflict-affected areas was published in Arabic on a locally hosted site. Despite its relevance to humanitarian health efforts, it has not been indexed, cited, or linked to any international literature review[17].

Such limited visibility has tangible effects on researchers' careers and funding opportunities. For instance, scholars publishing locally relevant work may miss eligibility for international grants that require indexing in global databases, constraining collaboration and career advancement.

This systemic disconnect between regional research outputs and global visibility platforms is illustrated in the "Visibility Gap" model (Fig. 1), which highlights the small proportion of MENA research discoverable through major indexing databases and the key barriers that limit integration.

Constructive steps toward inclusion: Improving MENA research visibility requires coordinated, multi-level efforts that address infrastructure, language, metrics, and inclusivity. These priorities are summarized in Fig. 1, which outlines six interconnected actions to close the visibility gap and ensure equitable participation in global scholarship.

- **Capacity building:** Organizations such as ACSE, INASP, and EASE already provide training for editors and peer reviewers. Expanding these initiatives into under-resourced MENA regions could improve editorial quality, enhance peer-review practices, and promote greater standardization[22]
- **Technical access:** Partnerships with global infrastructure providers (e.g., Crossref, DOAJ) could facilitate subsidized DOI registration, Open Journal Systems (OJS) installation, and XML conversion services, ensuring journals meet the technical requirements for international indexing
- **Regional indexing integration:** Strengthening collaboration between Scopus/Web of Science and regional citation platforms like ARCIF and ISC could promote inclusivity by recognizing and elevating high-quality regional outputs
- **Multilingual interoperability:** Adopting open metadata standards and cross-language search tools-such as Dimensions, which supports multilingual records- can improve discoverability and bridge linguistic divides
- **Narrative impact reports:** MENA journals could publish evidence-based accounts of how local research has influenced national policies, community programs, or industry practices, providing alternative impact indicators beyond citation counts

Fig. 2: Key priorities for rethinking research visibility in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)
The framework illustrates six interconnected actions-building infrastructure, valuing multilingualism, reforming metrics, connecting regional indexes, linking research to policy, and promoting inclusion-that collectively address structural barriers and foster equitable participation in global scholarly communication.

As shown in Fig. 2, these six priorities address both technical and systemic challenges, offering a practical roadmap for closing the visibility gap. MENA research output is expanding rapidly, yet remains underrepresented in global indexes due to infrastructural, linguistic, and systemic barriers. Addressing these gaps requires sustained investment in infrastructure, recognition of multilingual scholarship, reform of narrow performance metrics, integration of regional indexes into global systems, stronger policy-research linkages, and adherence to inclusive publishing standards.

Together, these actions can nurture a scholarly ecosystem that recognizes and values diverse contributions, strengthening both research integrity and global equity.

CONCLUSION

The MENA region is home to vibrant research communities, yet global recognition is constrained by a publishing ecosystem built around metrics that often ignore regional realities. This misalignment marginalizes critical knowledge and devalues the contributions of researchers working under complex socio-political and infrastructural constraints. To protect research integrity and promote knowledge equity, the global academic system must re-examine its dependency on narrow visibility standards. Recognition should not be determined solely by global citation counts, but also by local relevance, practical application, and societal impact. By supporting digital infrastructure, embracing multilingualism, and integrating regional metrics into global systems, we can create a scholarly environment where all contributions, regardless of origin, are acknowledged and valued.

SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

This study discovered the structural and systemic barriers that shape the visibility gap in scholarly publishing across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which can be beneficial for policymakers, journal editors, and academic institutions in designing interventions that promote equitable participation in the global research ecosystem. The findings emphasize the importance of multilingual publishing, capacity building, and regional–global indexing integration as strategies for addressing underrepresentation. By highlighting how overreliance on metrics undermines local relevance, this study will help researchers to uncover the critical areas of knowledge equity, linguistic diversity, and research inclusivity that many were not able to explore. Thus, a new theory on decolonizing scholarly communication may be arrived at.

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