

# ARAB R&E COMMUNITY GATHERS AT E-AGE2018



The Arab States Research and Education Network (ASREN), GÉANT's partner in the Arab region, hosted the 8th edition of its flagship event – eAGE18 – on 2-3 December 2018 in Jordan's capital Amman. As in previous years, e-AGE18 provided an ideal platform for the Arab R&E networking community to take stock of achievements and developments across the region and to explore opportunities for international cooperation.

Held under the patronage of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Jordan and in conjunction with 10th Annual Conference on Quality and Accreditation in Education (AROQA), the event attracted over 150 delegates from 35 countries and offered a high-quality programme with captivating speakers and ample opportunity for debate with an engaged audience.

During the opening session, ministers and senior officials stressed the need for the Arab region to secure its place on the global research and education map. Ambassador Andrea Fontana, Head of the European Union to Jordan, highlighted the importance of technological literacy and R&E connectivity as key factors for socio-economic and scientific progress and recognised the role of EU-funded programmes, such as EUMEDCONNECT3, in catalysing it by supporting a virtual environment in which ideas can be freely exchanged.

## Adapting to the 4th industrial revolution

One of the recurring conference themes was the need to adapt to the 4th industrial revolution. Artificial intelligence. Automation. Ubiquitous supercomputing. Self-driving cars. Exciting opportunities, but at the same time also the potential for technological unemployment. NRENs have a role to play – that was one of the core messages in the keynote of GÉANT's CEO Erik Huizer. NRENs can provide the tools and act as the enabler for governments, educators and students to tackle challenges to the educational systems and thus to cater for the individual rather than the mass brain.

## Ensuring access to knowledge

NRENs were called upon also by representatives of library consortia in Africa and the Middle East to help ensure open access to knowledge. Diana Naser, Library Director at Birzeit University in Palestine spelled it out: "Libraries need good connectivity, and we need your



help". The AfricaConnect2-funded LIBSENSE project sets out to provide this very support: improving the capabilities of the African HE libraries through workshops, organised by the AfricaConnect2 regional partners ASREN, WACREN and UbuntuNet Alliance, so that they can leverage network services and become effective curators of knowledge.

## The voice of demanding users

Attendees also heard first-hand accounts of data communications requirements from scientists involved in SESAME – the synchrotron radiation facility officially opened in Allan, 50km north of Amman, in 2017. Based on the CERN model, it is the largest scientific project in the Middle East, bringing together physicists from several countries that rarely talk to one another – Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Pakistan and Palestine – but whose scientists are determined to collaborate. Their enthusiasm about the fact that two beamlines are now operational was catching and their



endorsement for the need of international connectivity for such massive data generators (a single experiment generates 2–3 TB of raw data!) was undoubtedly music to many (networking) people in the room.

## Positive developments

e-AGE18 offered the opportunity to spread the word about R&E networking across the Arab and African world. There was a positive vibe also during the combined project meetings for EUMEDCONNECT3 and the North African cluster of AfricaConnect2 which took place jointly with Internet2's Middle East SIG the day prior to the conference with representatives from across North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf States.

Admittedly, the picture that emerged was complex and uneven. Some partners plan multi-gigabit upgrades, whilst others continue to be challenged by prohibitive tariffs in unfavourable market conditions.

**Pictures**  
Clockwise: Ambassador Andrea Fontana, Head of EU Delegation to Jordan; Panel discussion on synergies between regional R&E initiatives; Diana Naser, Library Director at Birzeit University, Palestine; Participants at joint EUMEDCONNECT3, AfricaConnect2 North Africa cluster and Internet2 Middle East SIG meeting

Yet, there were achievements to celebrate, such as the agreement with the European Union on a further AfricaConnect phase, the fact that all North African AfricaConnect2 partner countries now have access to international R&E connectivity, the nascent Lebanese NREN TechCARE, the explicit endorsement of the role of NRENs by the earth observation and high energy physics communities, and the willingness to share best practice and learn from each other, be it in human capacity building, roll-out of services such as eduroam and eduGAIN, promotion or user engagement strategies.

There are challenges ahead in the Arab R&E networking world – but there is a willingness among the partners to tackle them together!

Many thanks again to ASREN for a productive week in Amman!

For further information on e-AGE18, including presentations, please visit <http://asrenorg.net/eage18/>