About 60 miles north of Cairo’s Tahrir Square – the epicenter of the Egyptian uprising in 2011 – there is a secondary school students call “the prison.” A deformed box of concrete packed with dilapidated classrooms, the school is pockmarked with age and neglect. One teacher in the sleepy Nile Delta village morbidly quips that it doubles as a morgue. “We never saw a revolution here,” he said a few months ago, withholding his name for fear of losing his job. “A lot of the hope we had is now dead…it was killed.”

The plight of Egypt’s public schools is a critical indicator of how Egypt’s revolution has failed its people. Outside observers saw the popular rebellion against Hosni Mubarak’s regime as a struggle for democracy over dictatorship; the generals who once again rule Egypt portray it as a fight for secularism that was hijacked by radical Islam. In fact, it was a revolt for human dignity, for a better life for ordinary citizens.

Without education, that hope is stillborn, not only in Egypt but across the Middle East. According to the United Nations, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa are depriving more than 13 million children of an education. But it’s not just in war-torn Syria and Yemen where youth are systematically neglected; shortcomings abound in relatively stable countries such as Egypt and Jordan.

Inadequate education goes hand in hand with the region’s unemployment crisis. According to the International Labor Organization, the Middle East had the world's highest youth unemployment rates in 2014, with 46% of women and 24% of men out of work.

This toxic combination of poor education and high youth unemployment leaves millions of young people lingering in a purgatory that American University professor Diane Singerman calls “waithood.” The term describes the prolonged adolescence that young people must endure until they can afford marriage, the region’s institutional and cultural gateway to societal recognition, not to mention sexual activity.

Unfortunately, governments and international institutions regard education and unemployment as development issues, not political or security issues. The US gives Egypt $1.3 billion in annual military aid (second only to Israel), but just $250 million for civilian projects and programs.

Supporters of military assistance argue that weapons systems are needed to fight affiliates of Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State in the Sinai and to maintain American influence with Egypt’s generals. Yet, unless Egyptian youth have hope and opportunity, security assistance is only a Band-Aid. Long-term security depends on a government’s willingness to provide adequate public goods and services.
Suppose the United States and the International Monetary Fund conditioned military and financial assistance to Egypt on straightforward measures of educational progress. At the aggregate level, Egypt could improve its performance in global rankings. In the World Economic Forum’s latest report on global competitiveness, Egypt was ranked 139th out of 140 countries for quality of primary education.

Other changes, such as reducing the need for and the cost of private tutoring, would make a material difference in the lives of ordinary Egyptians. In Manshiyat Naser, one of Cairo’s poorest neighborhoods, young people like 18-year-old Ashraf Khalil have been studying for Thanaweya Amma, the infamous national secondary school examination. Their results will mean the difference between a coveted university spot and a life of second-class citizenry in a country with almost no social mobility.

“Things are actually worse since the revolution,” Khalil said while hopping on a minibus to a nearby wealthy residential compound where he gardens. He’s trying to make enough money to hire a private tutor for the exam. Indeed, private tutoring has become the de facto Egyptian education system.

Some teachers have admitted off the record that they teach the bare minimum in class, so that they can profit from the same students in private lessons. According to some estimates, Egyptian families spend more than $1 billion on private tutoring to compensate for poor education – a cost that often amounts to almost a quarter of household income.

The US and European governments, which have a vital interest in the stability and prosperity of countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, could also marshal and support consortia of private investors.

A few years ago, the Egyptian investor Ahmed Alfi started a virtual classroom called Nafham (Arabic for “We understand”). In an effort to reduce the country’s dependence on private tutoring, the web-based startup provides crowd-sourced educational videos. The service now has 500,000 users and offers a Syrian curriculum to service the 50% of that country’s refugee youth who are out of school.

But Alfi says it’s been challenging to find outside funding, and he is not alone. Last April, Abdul Aziz al-Ghurair, a billionaire businessman from the United Arab Emirates, launched the Arab world’s largest education fund, allocating $1.14 billion in grants for underserved youth from the region. According to Maysa Jalbout, CEO of the Abdulla al-Ghurair Foundation for Education, the fund hopes to provide scholarships for 15,000 Middle Eastern students over the next ten years. Beginning in September, students will receive financial assistance to attend the region’s top four universities; eventually, study at international universities will be funded as well.

But individual initiatives are not enough. “Efforts need to be systematic and institutionalized,” Jalbout explains. “No one fund can fix these problems…. [W]e need all hands on deck.” For that to happen, the education of Middle Eastern youth must be regarded as a strategic issue, worthy of just as much global foreign-policy attention as the fight against extremist groups. The region should be armed with pens, not just swords.