



مركز بروكنجز الدوحة
BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper

Number 4, February 2012

LIBERALIZING MONARCHIES?

How Gulf Monarchies
Manage Education Reform

Leigh Nolan



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Nolan joined the Brookings Doha Center as a visiting fellow in the spring of 2011, and is currently a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Doha Center and the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. Her research focuses on the political dynamics of institutional change in Saudi Arabia, through the lens of higher education reform. As a fellow with the Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization Program at the Fletcher School, she managed a partnership between the Fletcher School and Dar Al Hekma College in Saudi Arabia to establish the first international relations training program for women in the Kingdom. Leigh was a Boren graduate fellow in Yemen in 2007 and a Fulbright-Hayes lecturer in Iraqi Kurdistan in the spring of 2009. As a research associate in the Managing Global Order program at the Center on International Cooperation at New York University she focused on the role of emerging powers in the Middle East. Leigh received her MALD and Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts University and is the author of a recent Brookings Doha Center Policy Brief, “Managing Reform? Saudi Arabia and the King’s Dilemma” (April 2011).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the onset of the Arab uprisings, Gulf monarchies face increased pressure on their traditional ruling balance. Gulf Arab oil monarchies have traditionally been resistant to political reform, and their reaction to the Arab spring has largely followed suit. To focus solely on political liberalization, however, is to ignore ambitious societal and bureaucratic reforms that have been launched in recent years. In many ways, the processes and pressures involved in reforming the state's "soft institutions" – whether due to pressure from political elites, citizens, or the international community – offer important lessons for broader institutional reform in these cautiously liberalizing monarchies.

This paper focuses on one of such institution – the educational sector – and analyzes the extent to which reform in that sphere can provide models for wider liberalization. Education reform in the Gulf is a politically charged and socially sensitive endeavour with potential winners and losers among various co-opted groups. Looking at the experiences of three Gulf states - Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates – the study seeks to consider how successful these monarchies have been in transitioning from highly centralized and rigid bureaucracies to more responsive, innovative, and dynamic systems.

While all three countries share certain characteristics, the experiences of education reform in each differ significantly. All three have experimented with varying levels decentralization and privatization. In Saudi Arabia, the institution of higher education is implicated in both the imperatives of liberalization and the regime's religious legitimacy.

The ruling Al Saud have initiated controversial educational reforms by using peripheral institutions in order to bypass the clerical establishment. Institu-

tions such as academic cities, international partnerships, and quasi-governmental organizations have often provided a backdoor for reform. International accreditation and metrics also provide an external reference, which the regime can use to press for politically sensitive curricular reforms. These strategies have enabled the Saudi regime to accelerate the pace of education reform without directly challenging established institutions and their entrenched interests. However, in the absence of systemic reform that tackles those entrenched interests, the extent to which this model can succeed – and be replicated – remains limited.

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Qatar has taken dramatic steps to transform its education system. With no cohesive opposition groups, Qatar has been able to quickly implement pilot education reform projects and create the most high-profile branch campus model in the Middle East. Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani and his wife Sheikha Mozah have lent their support to a range of experimental and ambitious reforms, even outpacing demands from society and many liberal elites. Qatari education reform at both the secondary and tertiary level has been a top-down process, with the royal family as its driving force. As a result of the rapid pace of implementation and limited societal outreach, however, several aspects of the intended reform have become mired in unanticipated bureaucratic and social resistance. The lack of substantive engagement with various stakeholders in the education system prior to initiating an independent schools model led to substantial societal backlash, resulting in a recentralization of administrative control and a backtracking on several of the more controversial elements of the reforms.

In the UAE meanwhile, each of the Emirates has pursued different approaches to the privatization

of education, with Dubai embracing an unfettered market approach and Abu Dhabi supporting a statist approach. Due to Dubai's financial crisis, the more state-centric model is gaining influence as Abu Dhabi asserts a greater role over the federal structure. As in Qatar, Abu Dhabi's model of education reform has not significantly expanded avenues for societal participation, and the process of generating and implementing education reform remains centralized at the top.

The different models for higher education reform pursued by the three GCC nations studied suggests that demography, ideology, and resources all affect the degree to which a monarchy is able to pursue institutional innovation. A shared tactic, however, is the use of new or peripheral institutions such as Abu Dhabi Education Council, the Qatar Foundation, and Saudi Aramco, to circumvent turgid bureaucracies and rapidly implement high-profile pilot project reforms. Nonetheless, a pilot project does not imply systemic transformation. While education reforms may promote liberalization in other sectors of society – either through creating a better educated, more demanding populace, or through a “beacon effect” – they are unlikely to provide a genuinely replicable model for reform.

Whether the current model of “autocratic modernization” can deliver dynamic and globally competitive public institutions remains to be seen. As shown with the creation of education cities and parallel institutions, it is possible to rapidly implement model reforms through bureaucratic maneuvering. However, these efforts are largely bounded, and their ability to permeate through the rest of the system is limited. Systemic and sustainable reform requires broader societal consultation and modes of participation to limit backlash and increase bureaucratic responsiveness.

Without such mechanisms, education reform will likely remain superficial and inadequate to the task.

INTRODUCTION

Gulf monarchies are entering the 21st century with immense pressure on their traditional ruling balance. Possessing largely statist economies, a growing youth demographic, and the societal pressures attendant with rapid social and technological change, it is crucial to understand the possibilities and limits of each monarchy's ability to adapt to these challenges.

This analysis paper will focus on the question of how institutional reform occurs in a monarchy. Is it possible for rigid systems to transform themselves, short of political upheaval, to be more flexible and responsive? The paper will compare the process of liberalization in a key "soft institution"¹ of the state, the education sector, in three separate Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Though these states differ markedly in population size and per capita GDP, they share a system of hereditary monarchy, vast oil and gas wealth, and Islam as a social force. Each is currently undergoing varying degrees of aggressive economic liberalization. This paper will seek to answer why and how these monarchies have pursued different education reform models and their implications for wider reform efforts.

The analysis presented here is based on fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. Through interviews with high-level officials and individuals involved in the education sector in each country, as well as government documents, NGO reports, and local newspaper coverage, the paper will attempt to detail the type of institutional change that has occurred in the education sector in the past decade, analyzing

how institutional reform has been pursued, and by whom. Through this research endeavor, I hope to illuminate how education reform occurs in the "tight" political space of a Gulf oil monarchy.

Why Higher Education?

Today, with a growing youth population putting pressure on the government to create new jobs, the battle for control over the institutions of education has become ever more central to national identity. The education sector serves as a model for institutional liberalization in the Gulf monarchies due to its centrality to each state's political economy, its position at the nexus of religious and political interests, and the seemingly rapid process of reform it has undergone in the past decade.

Education and literacy at all levels have been recognized as highly significant in the general literature on democratization. Both have increased exponentially in the Gulf states in the past 30 years.² Human capital theories of education maintain that a rising tide floats all boats – that is, the more educated a populace the stronger and more dynamic the economy.³ In 2003, the UN Arab Human Development Report explicitly linked the quality of higher education to rates of employment and technological innovation in Gulf countries.⁴ The same report emphasized how the quality of teaching in academic institutions throughout the

1 For the purposes of this research I use the term "soft institutions" to encompass institutions which project state authority in the societal realm i.e. media, education, health, in contrast to traditional institutions of state authority, such as a military or formal political structure.

2 Guido Steinberg, "The Wahhabi Ulama and the Saudi State: 1745 to the Present," in *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, eds. Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 24.

3 World Bank Group, "Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education," 2002; World Economic Forum, "World Competitiveness Report," Center for International Development, 2000.

4 United Nations Development Program, "Arab Human Development Report: Building a Knowledge Society," 2003.

Middle East, particularly the use of rote memorization, has resulted in graduates underprepared for the demands of the private sector labor market. In an attempt to address these concerns, Gulf countries have emphasized the importance of building “knowledge economies,” with leaders looking towards such dynamic economies as South Korea and Singapore for guidance on structuring economic reform and harnessing human capital.⁵

While this paper does not assess the quality of educational instruction in the academic institutions studied, it seeks to answer how significant changes to the status quo are enacted, and how the monarchy manages potential backlash. How and why Gulf monarchies initiate education reforms and how such reforms impact the traditional relationship between the religious establishment and liberal elites has implications for wider bureaucratic transformation.

Much of the literature on liberalization in the Middle East has focused on formal political reform. In such studies, liberalizing measures include the introduction of a Majlis or Shura (parliament or consultative body) with democratization seen as the end goal. Yet the oil monarchies of the Gulf have been largely resistant to democratization, even as they embark on ambitious societal and bureaucratic reform. Scholars and policy-makers attributed the region’s supposed democratic “exceptionalism” to reasons as diverse as external support for authoritarian regimes,⁶ the

influence of Islam,⁷ the legacy of colonialism,⁸ the abundance of oil,⁹ tribal factionalism,¹⁰ and cultural constraints.¹¹ However, in light of the Arab spring, theories of continued authoritarianism in the Middle East must be re-examined. In some respects, the processes involved in reforming the higher education sector, whether driven by political elites, popular pressure, or international concerns, may be a model for greater political and societal reforms in these cautiously liberalizing monarchies. The process of reform – the actors involved in the bargaining process and the pace of compromise – is essential to understanding the type of reform that emerges.

5 I attended three workshops and conferences sponsored by the government and Jeddah Chamber of Commerce on Saudi Arabia’s “knowledge economy” while I was in Jeddah from January-May 2008. See Zamila Bunglawala, “Nurturing a Knowledge Economy in Qatar,” Brookings Doha Center Policy Briefing, September 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2011/09_qatar_bunglawala/09_qatar_bunglawala.pdf>.

6 Gregory Gause argues that the survival and continued authoritarian control of Gulf monarchies and by implication their ability to resist pressures for political liberalization is due to extreme protection by external actors such as the United States and various western interests. Yet this analysis fails to account for the reforms that are taking place, even in Western allied regimes – such as Saudi Arabia. Gregory Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994), 175-199.

7 Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Timur Kuran argues that Islamic Law, particularly its treatment of business ownership of stymied the creation of large and complex corporations as exist in the European model until the late 19th century. John Waterbury attributed the lack of democratization in the Gulf to the unique nature of political Islam as a significant intervening variable that may delay progress along the curve out of authoritarianism to democratic consolidation. John Waterbury, “Democracy Without Democrats?: the potential for political liberalization in the Middle East,” in *Democracy Without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*, ed. Ghassan Salamé. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994).

8 Malcolm Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East* (London and New York: Longman Inc., 1987); and William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 2nd Edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); and Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003).

9 Rentierism will be discussed further in section 5.

10 Joseph Kostiner, “Transforming Dualities,” in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, eds. Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 226-51; see also Madawi al-Rasheed, “The Politics of Encapsulation: Saudi Policy towards Tribal and Religious Opposition,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 1996): 96-119.

11 Samuel Huntington, “Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993).

THE CASE OF EDUCATION REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA 2000-2011

Saudi Arabia stands out among Gulf Monarchies due to the size of its polity,¹² its strategic influence in and outside the Gulf,¹³ and its unique influence in the Muslim world as the keeper of the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina. Unemployment is estimated at anywhere from 10-20 percent for men with severely limited employment opportunities for women, and little private sector job creation.¹⁴ According to official Saudi statistics, 27 percent of Saudis under the age of 30 were unemployed in 2009,¹⁵ a problem aggravated by a dependence on foreign labor¹⁶ and declining government subsidies.¹⁷ Even with the rise in the price of oil, Saudi Arabia's GDP per capita of \$24,000 ranks second to last in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).¹⁸

The higher education sector is a crucial institution to the Saudi monarchy given that it is implicated in both the imperatives of liberalization and the dynamics of the regime's religious legitimacy. Oil income undeniably allows for short-term decompression of political unrest, as exhibited in King Abdullah's announcement of a social welfare handout totaling \$29.5 billion after the implosion of the autocratic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt.¹⁹ However, traditional rentier-state models of cooptation and consent do not satisfactorily explain the political bargaining that the state has engaged in with business and familial elites, as well as the conservative religious establishment, to pursue education reform.

Due to the rapid expansion of the public sector in the 1970s and 80s with the influx of oil wealth, the vast majority Saudi students seek public employment upon graduation.²⁰ Flexibility to move between jobs is low and incentives for skill enhancement are limited. Public sector employment in Saudi Arabia emphasizes easy access and administrative work rather than skill building linked to labor market needs.²¹ As the forces of globalization and regional unrest intensify pressure on the Al-Saud regime to address the lack of job opportunities, reform of the education system has become even more critical to the country's fortunes.

12 Gerd Nonneman notes that Saudi Arabia has the largest polity among the Gulf monarchies – making for a different dynamic of political change. He states, “These are small polities, featuring strong personal, kinship and other social networks that cut across ideological and economic cleavages. Change may be more easily manageable here.” Gerd Nonneman, “Political Reform in the Gulf Monarchies: From Liberalization to Democratization,” in *Reform in the Middle East Oil Monarchies*, eds. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Steven Wright (Reading, Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 2008), 22.

13 Saudi Arabia contains one-quarter of the world's proven oil reserves.

14 Data on unemployment in Saudi Arabia vary; 2003 estimates for unemployment were 30 percent, while 2008 data from the Ministry of Economy and Planning estimated unemployment at 8.8 percent; see <<http://www.susris.com/2010/06/17/saudi-arabia-economics-june-2010/>>.

Jasim Ali, “Saudi Arabia Needs to Tackle Unemployment Among youth,” *Gulf News*, March 16, 2008, <http://www.gulfnews.com/business/Comment_and_Analysis/10197633.html>; CIA World Factbook, “Saudi Arabia” <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/sa.html>>.

15 John Sfakianakis, “Banque Saudi Fransi: Saudi Arabia Economics - Employment quandary,” *The Gulf Intelligence*, February 21, 2011, <<http://www.thegulfintelligence.com/Docs.Viewer/8ad91021-1053-43d7-b8a8-d250151257ab/default.aspx>>.

16 Ibid.

17 Gause, *Oil Monarchies*.

18 United Nations Development Program, “Explanation note on 2010 Human Development Report Composite Indices: Saudi Arabia,” 2010, <<http://hdrstats.undp.org/images/explanations/SAU.pdf>>.

19 Nawaf Obaid, “There Will Be No Uprising in Saudi Arabia”, *Foreign Policy*, March 10, 2011.

20 Sfakianakis, “Saudi Arabia Economics - Employment quandary.”

21 Sharon Shochat, “The Gulf Cooperation Council Economies: Diversification and Reform,” Kuwait Research Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States at the London School of Economics and Political Science, February 2008. For a discussion of this issue as it relates to Qatar and the UAE, see Zamila Bunglawala “Young, educated and dependent on the public sector: Meeting graduates' aspirations and diversifying employment in Qatar and the UAE,” Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, November 2011.

The Ulema and Education

While multiple actors have shaped the process of social and political change in Saudi Arabia, few have held so dominant a role as that of the Wahhabi movement of scholars. Wahhabism, the 18th century religious reform movement has been central to the formation of the Saudi Arabian state and the maintenance of the Al-Saud regime.²² The Al-Saud rule under the Islamic criteria of *wali al-ahd* (rightful leadership) and the support of the *ulema* (religious scholars) is essential to maintaining its authority in this realm.²³ In practice, this “grand-bargain” between the Al-Saud and the ulema has meant that the former retains dominance of the political and military spheres of state while the latter exerts influence over the social spheres – including education and the judiciary.

However, the relationship between the Al-Saud and the clerics has been far from static. The ulema themselves are not uniform. They have been splintered by opposition to the Al-Saud regime on several occasions – most notably during the 1979 siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca; in the early 1990s following the basing of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia; and most recently during protests against education reform and gender mixing.²⁴ This relationship between the state-sponsored or “official” ulema and dissident religious voices is a complex one and has significant impact on the dynamic between liberal reform efforts

and the state, especially in the sphere of education.²⁵

By the mid-1980s, the regime had moved to shore up its religious legitimacy, systematically co-opting and consolidating the ulema by emphasizing the Wahhabi character of the state. This included giving religious leaders more authority in the sphere of “soft” institutions – comprising education and social codes of conduct. The shift was most evident in the sharp departure from the liberal education reforms under King Faisal (r.1964-1975). Religious curricula were highlighted, funding for religious universities was dramatically increased,²⁶ and universities were placed under the strict control of the ministry of higher education (MoHE) which had been founded in 1975.²⁷ In 1982, study abroad programs with the West were temporarily de-authorized and Saudi students abroad were recalled in the middle of the academic year.²⁸ New regulations prohibited female students from studying abroad.²⁹ Meanwhile, universities ran summer centers to further the Islamic education of the students.³⁰ While overall student enrollment increased throughout the 1980s, resources were disproportionately allocated to religious universities and programs.³¹ The higher education sector became less

22 John S. Habib, “Wahhabi Origins of the Contemporary Saudi State,” in *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia*, eds. Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009), 57-74.

23 Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11-13. In his examination of the Saudi state Niblock further detailed several sub-types of legitimacy that have been essential for the regime’s survival: ideological, traditional, personal, structural and eudemonic. See also John S. Habib, “Wahhabi Origins of the Contemporary Saudi State.”

24 For an excellent and concise summary of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia see Guido Steinberg, “The Wahhabi Ulema and the Saudi State: 1745 to the Present,” in *Saudia Arabia in the Balance*, eds. Aarts and Nonneman, 11.

25 Nawaf Obaid, “The Power of Saudi Arabia’s Islamic Leaders,” *Middle East Quarterly* (September 1999), 51-58, <<http://www.meforum.org/482/the-power-of-saudi-arabias-islamic-leaders>>.

26 Michaela Prokop, “The War of Ideas: Education in Saudi Arabia” in *Saudi Arabia in the Balance*, eds. Aarts and Nonneman, 61.

27 Mohammed Eisa Faheem, *Higher Education and Nation Building: A Case Study of King Abdul Aziz University* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1982), 79.

28 Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (London: Al Saqi Books, 2000), 397.

29 Ibid.

30 Abdullah al-Lheedan, “Higher Education, Political Development and Stability in Saudi Arabia,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1994, 210.

31 Gad G. Gilbar, *The Middle East Oil Decade and Beyond* (London, Portland OR: Frank Cass, 1997), 77-101; and Nasser Ibrahim Rashid, *King Fahd and Saudi Arabia’s Great Evolution* (Joplin, MO: International Institute of Technology, 1987), 123.

dynamic over time, coming under the control of religious interests in the Ministries of Education (MoE) and Higher Education (MoHE) throughout the 1980s and 90s.

Starting in the late 1980s, institutions focused on the private sector, such as the Ministries of Commerce and Labor became central arenas for pressing for liberalization.³² However, these efforts were stymied by the rise of Islamist opposition in response to the basing of U.S. troops in the kingdom during the first Gulf War. In the aftermath of the war, vocal anti-establishment clerics and their young followers became known as the *Sahwa* (awakening) movement. These unofficial or dissident ulema were often educated in Saudi religious institutions in the 1980s, during the height of calls to jihad in Afghanistan. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, many members of which became instructors in Saudi universities, served as an additional inspiration.³³ Throughout the 1980s, the regime's efforts to co-opt religious opposition by strengthening religious institutions empowered and emboldened the very forces it hoped to undermine.³⁴

The educational policies of the 1980s and 90s bore bitter fruit with a dramatic disconnect between university graduates' skill sets and the needs of the labor market. By the late 1990s, the dual pressures of the demographic youth bulge³⁵ and a lack of skilled graduates was undeniable. Indeed, by 1995, over 25 percent of the university students were enrolled in religious universities. Over 75 percent of graduates who were seeking jobs labeled humanities or religious studies as their major.³⁶ By 2001, there were

only 50,000 private sector jobs for every 100,000 university graduates – regardless of skill match. At the same time, the high-skilled foreign national workforce had increased to over two million.³⁷

Education Reform in Saudi Arabia: 2000-2010

By the start of the new century, it had become clear that the education system needed an overhaul. The Al-Saud regime, however, faced significant constraints in managing the potentially destabilizing process of education reform. One such constraint was a vast and unwieldy bureaucratic sector. Oil wealth has allowed the monarchy to employ a disproportionately large percentage of its citizens in the public sector. Unsurprisingly, this has decreased the dynamism of public sector institutions. To rapidly transform sectors such as higher education often requires the regime to navigate around entrenched bureaucratic and social interests. Reform then becomes a politically charged endeavour with potential winners and losers among various co-opted groups.

By 2010, the Ministry of Higher Education had opened more than 100 new universities and colleges in four years, and the national education budget had tripled since 2004 (eventually reaching 25 percent of the national budget).³⁸ Education reform was cited as a pillar of the efforts to diversify the Saudi economy, "Saudize" the kingdom's companies, and to address labor market inefficiencies and growing youth unemployment.³⁹ The ban on private colleges and universities was lifted and the private higher education sector expanded dramatically.⁴⁰ The political discourse on education opened to the point where government-run newspapers frequently debated the

32 Steffen Hertog, "Segmented Clientelism: The Political Economy of Saudi Economic Reform Efforts", in *Saudi Arabia in the Balance*, 139.

33 Hrair Dekmejian, "The Rise of Political Islamism in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 627-644.

34 Toby Jones, "Religious Revivalism and its Challenge to the Saudi Regime," in *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia*, eds. Ayoob and Kosebalaban, 109.

35 According to the UNDP, more than 50 percent of the population was below age of 18 in 1995. United Nations Development Program, Population Database.

36 Gwenn Okruhlik, "Networks of Dissent: Islamism and Reform in Saudi Arabia," Social Science Research Council Website, < http://essays.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/okruhlik_text_only.htm>

37 For a particularly prescient analysis of the tensions involved in youth unemployment and stagnant social institutions see Neil MacFarquhar, "Leisure Class to Working Class in Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2001.

38 Zvika Krieger, "Saudi Arabia: Reforms in Higher Education Raise Questions," *Arab Reform Bulletin* 5, no. 10 (2007), 10.

39 Sfakianakis, "Saudi Arabia Economics - Employment Quandary."

40 "Higher Education in Saudi Arabia," Summary Report 1428 AH, Ministry of Higher Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), <<http://www.mohe.gov.sa/en/aboutus/Pages/Achievements-and-aspirations.aspx>>.

merits of private versus public education, and religious versus scientific education.⁴¹ Two episodes are reflective of the liberalizing trend in the education sector at the time. In 2009, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) opened, boasting a reported \$15 billion endowment,⁴² an independent curriculum, international board of advisors, and with co-education written into its founding document.⁴³ That year also saw the appointment of the first female to a cabinet level position, as a deputy minister of education.

What happened? How did education reformers, both inside and outside the regime, navigate reform challenges that had largely kept the education sector underdeveloped for over 20 years and under the control of religious interests? And, most importantly, will these reforms endure?

Privatization of Higher Education

Economic pressures on the regime, such as rising unemployment, combined with the growing power of new business and technocratic elites, created a lobby for higher education reform. Increased internal and international attention on radicalization in Saudi society after 9/11 diminished the ulema's cohesiveness and power and increased the political space for liberal elites to press for education reform. To do so, they have pushed for privatization and international partnerships that diminish the control of the ulema in the sphere of education.

The first private colleges – Dar al-Hekma, Effat College for Women (now Effat University) and Sultan College in Riyadh (now Prince Sultan University) – all started in 1999 with the backing of business elites

and several members of the royal family.⁴⁴ To separate themselves from the centralized MoHE system they pursued several strategies: independent financing, affiliations with international bodies such as accreditation organizations; international metrics such as the Shanghai Classification⁴⁵; and royal patronage.⁴⁶ These colleges were experimental initiatives; the rules of the game had yet to be written. It was unclear if private financing would allow private colleges to maintain their distance from MoHE oversight. They relied on mainly on informal relationships and tacit support from members of the Al-Saud regime to maintain their distinct status and independence.

After the attacks of September 11, private higher education moved from the experimental periphery driven by a few liberal “innovators” and became a government sanctioned activity. As international media increasingly focused on Saudi Arabia's education system and its link to domestic extremism, there was greater political space for liberal elites to press the regime for more ambitious social and economic reforms. However, international attention presented a double-edged sword for education reformers: on the one hand, it generated space for debate within the regime while allowing the international community to make the most strident charges; on the other, it forced the regime and reformers alike to demonstrate that they were not merely responding to “Western” pressure by pursuing education reform.⁴⁷

By 2008 private education had expanded beyond the purview of a handful of small institutions to a proliferating number of private colleges and universities

41 One such example: Mina al-Uraybi, “Seminar on Extremism, Terrorism in London Looks into Issues of Education, Citizenship, Social Traditions; Participants Say Combating Terrorism Requires Reform, Curricula Review,” *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 3, 2005.

42 The exact value of the waqf is not public; Vice President for Development, KAUST, phone interview by author, Dammam, KSA, March 2011.

43 Ibid.; Co-education is by Royal Decree, however the content of the royal decree is not public.

44 Effat College was initially established as a finishing school for elites by Queen Effat in 1956; see Catherine Parssinen, “The Changing Role of Women” in *King Faisal and the Modernization of Saudi Arabia*, ed. Willard Beling (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae Publishing, 2007). It was not recognized as a ‘private college’ until 1999. Interview, Effat administrator, 2009.

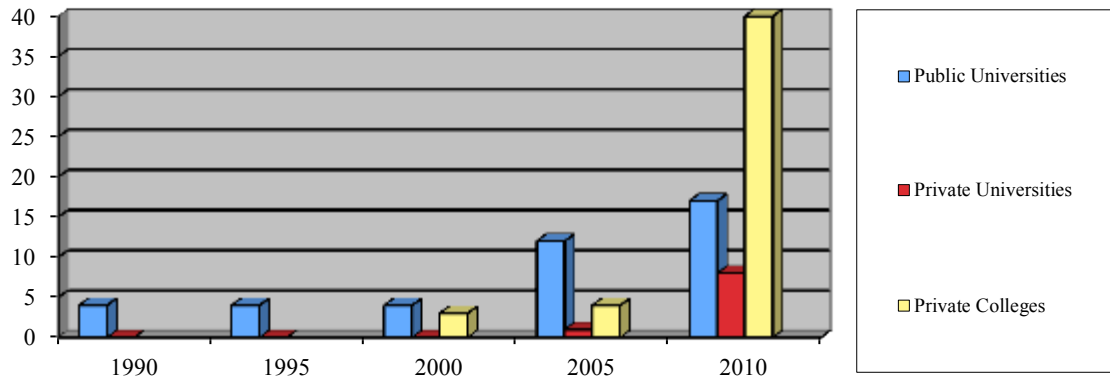
45 The Shanghai Classification of Universities, also known as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) is regarded to be one of the most influential and widely observed international university rankings.

46 Author's interviews with academic administrators, private colleges, Jeddah, KSA, April 2008.

47 Khalid al-Ujaimi, Professor at Imam Saud University in Riyadh, quoted in “Saudi Professor Views Rallies, Rejects Reform Calls from Abroad,” *Al-Jazeera*, December 16, 2004.

(see Fig. 1). It should be noted that while the number of private colleges increased exponentially, the establishment of a few private universities is even more significant due to their greater enrollment capacity.

Fig.1 Public and Private Universities and Colleges 1998-2010



Compiled from MoHE statistics, CDSI

The significance of private higher education lies in the realm of curriculum reform. From 2003 to 2008, private universities were able to initiate previously forbidden (whether tacitly or expressly) programs such as international law and international business and use English as the medium of instruction, while reducing and combining Arabic and Islamic course requirements – all curricular innovations that had not been approved by the MoHE for public universities.⁴⁸ As a member of the Majlis al-Shura’s Education Committee noted in 2008, “It is not yet easier for the government to change the curriculum than the private universities.”⁴⁹ Private universities and colleges frequently sought international accreditation for new programs, both to ensure quality and attract students.⁵⁰ They were also able to conduct international hiring searches for faculty and to select students based on their own admissions criteria.⁵¹

48 Author’s interview with the president of a private university, Riyadh, KSA, May 2009.

49 Author’s interview with a member of the Majlis al-Shura’s Education Committee, KSA, May 2009.

50 Author’s interviews with Academic Deans of private colleges, Jeddah, KSA, May 2009.

51 Ibid.

Challenges to the Privatization of Higher Education

By far the most challenging aspect of privatization of higher education in Saudi Arabia is the relationship of new private institutions with the MoHE. In a November 2006 meeting of the Majlis al-Shura, members strongly criticized the pace and scope of higher education reform, particularly the continued centralization of bureaucratic and financial control under the MoHE.⁵² Dr. Saud Al-Shammari, a member of the council’s Education and Scientific Committee, stated that “the current system does not serve the needs of the economy and society. It is the old system with only a few changes to the administration and finance segments. The educational content remains unchanged. ...[higher education] should be freed from bureaucracy and financial restrictions.”⁵³

As one higher education reformer who has served on several internal regime committees on the expansion of private education explained:

52 “Saudi Shura Council members ‘Strongly Criticize’ Kingdom Higher Education System,” *Arab News*, November 6, 2006.

53 Ibid.

Now while the vision is clear, implementing is going to be extremely difficult because higher education [needs to be] freed up from the government bureaucracy [allowing] the universities to become more and more independent... I think they haven't addressed that independence yet, because like any other government issue, to give something independence from a government bureaucracy is a struggle.⁵⁴

The regulations or “rules of the road” governing the relationship between the MoHE and private institutions remained vaguely defined. As one private college dean characterized the college’s relationship with the MoHE, “we keep pushing until they say stop, but we make it hard for them to say stop.”⁵⁵

While private universities enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than public universities in terms of faculty and staff hiring, student selection, and program initiation, they remained ultimately dependent on the MoHE for licensing and curriculum approval. This oversight tended to fluctuate according to personality, relationships, and the prevailing political winds. As one dean of a private “for-profit” college put it, “tenure in the ministries of education is a problem, because it is hard to change a system of education, a whole mind set, when the employees remain the same.”⁵⁶ In a 2011 follow-up interview, a former private university president cited the ambiguity of MoHE control over private institutions as a driving factor behind his decision to retire, stating, “I left because private education was not independent. What does private mean if it is no different from public?”⁵⁷

Another persistent and long-term challenge in expanding private higher education in Saudi Arabia is financing. As higher education has been a solely government funded sector for the past three decades,

no system exists for lending to those who cannot immediately afford the high tuition of private colleges and universities.⁵⁸ There are, however, expanding scholarship opportunities for the best performers in private education.⁵⁹ In addition, there are several private institutions that provide scholarships, such as the King Faisal Foundation.⁶⁰

The case for privatization of higher education as a vehicle for lasting education reform in Saudi Arabia is mixed. While private colleges backed by liberal elites have had significantly more leeway in proposing curriculum changes and “experimental” programs than public institutions, all syllabi, courses of study, and curriculum changes are ultimately still vetted by the MoHE. Continued expansion of private higher education is dependent on private financing and the willingness of business elites to continue to push for changes. Privatization alone is not a guarantee of independence from government ministries, nor is it necessarily a prescription for quality education. However, it is the first step towards establishing competition in a sector which has traditionally been dominated by the religious elite.

Peripheral Institutions

A second significant development in higher education is the regime’s use of peripheral institutions to implement controversial educational initiatives. Unlike privatization, which relied on market forces and liberal elites, the regime itself carved out “islands of efficiency” such as Saudi Aramco and the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) to manage flagship education projects such as King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). These pockets of reform allowed the regime to accelerate high visibility reform projects, without directly confronting more established institutions and the vested religious interests behind them. The prime ex-

54 Author’s interview with Saudi Aramco executive, Jeddah, KSA, April 2008.

55 Author’s interview with Private College official, Jeddah, KSA, March 2008.

56 Author’s interview with Administrator, Private for profit College, Jeddah, KSA, April 2008.

57 Author’s interview with Al-Yamama University President, Riyadh, KSA, May 2009.

58 Author’s interview with Administrator, College for Business Administration (CBA), Jeddah, KSA, April 2008.

59 For example, in 2008 the MoHE approved new regulations which would allow the top 30 percent of students (via GPA rankings) in private colleges to receive full tuition from the government.

60 Author’s interview with Al-Faisal University professor, Jeddah, KSA, April 2008.

ample of this strategy is KAUST, a scientific research institution with a focus on graduate level education inaugurated in 2009 by King Abdullah.⁶¹ As one Aramco veteran involved in establishing KAUST put it,

KAUST was established to be an international, global university, not just for Saudi students.... its purpose wasn't to get graduate students, it was to get scientists and minds, researchers that can transfer and translate those great innovations and inventions and research base to feed the economy. It was to drive and be driven by the economy's needs.⁶²

The curriculum is entirely secular, with no required courses in religion or Arabic – in contrast to all other education institutions both private and public, in the country. The exclusive oversight and control of the establishment of KAUST was explicitly granted by King Abdullah to Saudi Aramco instead of to the Ministry of Higher Education. By placing an educational institution under the authority of a government entity other than the MoHE, the monarchy was in effect 'repurposing' it in order to maintain its independence from the rest of the regime.⁶³ As one government official described the use of Aramco to establish KAUST:

The King gave KAUST to Aramco because he wanted it to happen and he knew that if it was given to the MoHE, it would get bogged down in bureaucracy. Initially, the initiative was appropriated for 9 billion riyals. They wanted it to happen through MoHE, but after two years in the ministry of finance they couldn't get it co-ed or international. Is KAUST replicable? I don't know. It's more of a model to see what works and will be tolerated.⁶⁴

61 Caryle Murphy, "King Invests 10bn in New University," *The National*, September 23, 2009.

62 Author's interview with Saudi Aramco VP, Jeddah, KSA, April 2008.

63 Siraj Wahab, "We Want KAUST to Reach MIT Level," *Arab News*, October 21, 2007, <<http://archive.arabnews.com/?page=1§ion=0&article=102682&d=21&m=10&y=2007>>.

64 Author's interview with SAGIA education official, Riyadh, KSA, May 2009.

KAUST is also the first university in the Kingdom to be established with an endowment (*waqf*). The precise amount of KAUST's endowment is uncertain, but figures from \$10 to 15 billion have been widely quoted in the Saudi media.⁶⁵ A waqf under Islamic law cannot be redirected to other purposes by future government decisions. Framing the endowment form of financing for a university in Islamic terms serves a dual purpose: to legitimize the endeavor as Islamically inspired, or at least consistent with Islamic law, and to create a religio-legal barrier to subsequent renegotiation of the project.⁶⁶ The endowment model also has the potential to be replicated further throughout the kingdom.⁶⁷

Another strategy that KAUST's backers have employed to mitigate a conservative reactionary backlash is the pursuit of international partnerships, in contrast to the branch campus model pursued in both Qatar and the UAE. While KAUST relies on the expertise of several internationally renowned and mainly Western scientific universities – such as MIT, Harvard, and Berkley – it is careful to emphasize that it is a Saudi institution, not a branch campus or imitative westernized university. Instead, KAUST is repeatedly positioned in the Saudi media as a "global crossroads" with Singapore, South Korea and China frequently mentioned as development inspirations.⁶⁸

Though KAUST enrolls fewer than 1000 students, its potential to serve as a model for nation-wide higher education reform was stressed by both members of Aramco and higher education officials.⁶⁹ This "bea-

65 Shafquat Ali, "KAUST: King's Gift to the World," *Arab News*, September 24, 2009.

66 For the evolution of the Waqf, see Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 110.

67 Since the founding of KAUST several public universities are now examining the endowment model for specific research centers and programs including King Abdul Aziz University, King Saud University in Riyadh and the soon-to-be opened Princess Noura Bint University, also in Riyadh.

68 For language emphasizing geographic and cultural diversity of the International Advisory Committee, see also King Abdul Aziz University of Science and Technology, "KAUST: International Advisory Committee" <<http://www.KAUST.edu.sa/about/iac/iac.html>>.

69 Author's interview with the president of a private university, Riyadh, KSA, May 2009; author's interview with Committee for International Partnerships member, MoHE, Riyadh, KSA, May 2009.

con” model of innovation has a two-fold benefit to the monarchy: it is able to quickly implement limited change within certain parameters and to do so without directly confronting existing institutions and entrenched interests.

Even with its limited scale, KAUST has pushed the conservative cultural envelope in several key dimensions, namely co-education and a secular curriculum. In a 2007 national address, King Abdullah declared that KAUST would be a beacon of learning for all – including women.⁷⁰ Unlike in all other higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, men and women would not only be allowed to study on the same campus, but in the same classroom. As such, KAUST quickly became a lightning rod for conservative criticism and ignited a media firestorm over its policy of coeducation.⁷¹ In one such instance, a popular jihadist website singled out KAUST as an “abomination” and called for its destruction.⁷²

However, by not specifically delineating the circumstances where gender mixing would be allowable, the regime created a productive ambiguity for other institutions that wish to embark on co-education while not forbidding the religious police from enforcing gender segregation elsewhere. This tactic suggests that while the highest levels of the regime are willing to expend considerable political capital to defend KAUST, they have yet to confront state institutions – preserving a functional tension between ideology and enforcement.

Analysis of Higher Education Reforms, 2000-2010

The crisis that 9/11 posed to the regime, combined with growing economic and demographic pressures, created the conditions necessary for the Al-Saud

regime’s reassessment of its ruling balance with the ulema. While 9/11 was not the sole catalyst for higher education reform in the kingdom, it was a significant contributing factor. It allowed domestic reformers an external referent for reform standards, created the political space to advocate for reform without being labeled anti-Al-Saud, and provided a clear incentive for the regime to re-evaluate its relationship to the religious establishment. The creation of economic cities, the introduction of a private higher education, and the increase in international education partnerships have all emerged seemingly through tacit understandings between business and technocratic elites and the regime.

Subsequent to 9/11, private higher education moved from the experimental periphery driven by a few “innovators” to a government sanctioned activity affecting the behavior and discourse of state higher education institutions and ministries. However, the regime does not have the limitless power to impose educational change, as predicted by traditional rentier theorists, but rather must maneuver around its own bureaucracy. These existing bureaucratic structures reflect prior compromises with societal interests.⁷³

Sometimes, it is easier to build new institutions, than to change the old. This is most evident in the use of peripheral institutions such as Aramco and SAGIA to initiate controversial reform projects. Such moves require a high degree of support from the regime – both monetary and political – but present a challenge to existing bureaucratic structures, such as the Ministry of Higher Education. This tactic, however, allows selective privatization while holding off on a dramatic and rapid reform of public universities.

The regime’s use of peripheral institutions allows for a faster pace of reform, while limiting bureaucratic push-back. On the other hand, such actions expose the regime to direct criticism – as opposed to the ex-

70 Mshari al-Zaydi, “Saudi Arabia: Entering a New Scientific and Technological Age,” *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, October 28, 2007.

71 For instance, Ahmad al-Masri, “Intellectuals class for Confronting the Sheikh’s Opposition” *Al-Quds al-Arabi Online*, October 2, 2009 via World News Connection (in translation).

72 “Abu Yahya al-Libi Criticizes Saudi Scholars, Western Education in Saudi Arabia,” OSC summary of Jihadist Websites, February 6, 2010. Available from World News Connection.

73 See Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve*, 218 for discussion of institutional path dependence, “Scholars of path dependence emphasize some contingency at the moment of institutional innovation and suggest that that forces behind the creation of a particular institution may be quite different from the forces that sustain it over time.” Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

perimental private reform led by business elites from which the monarchy could distance itself. While many peripheral institutional reforms are reversible by royal edict, they nonetheless carry potent symbolic weight. The ability for these initiatives to trickle down and transform the higher education system as a whole, however, remains to be seen. While there are significant and ongoing changes in curricular innovation, international outreach, English language usage, and funding increases to scientific disciplines in public universities, it is difficult to label this as “real” institutional reform at the present moment. While the regime is able to push public institutions to increase curricular offerings and explore private-public research partnerships, the formal education bureaucracy nonetheless remains highly centralized and continues to control the bulk of the higher education system.

Implications for Broader Institutional Reform

The trajectory of change in higher education and its impact on Saudi society reflects larger shifts in the Al-Saud’s relationship with religious, technical, and business elites. Furthermore, the nature of the regime’s management of these elites and their interests has implications for the prospects of broader institutional reform.

By allowing limited privatization, the Al-Saud regime is attempting to increase political space for liberal elites to push controversial reforms without having to directly confront religious interests themselves. The regime’s creation of parallel institutions to initiate rapid high profile reform projects is another strategy which is used beyond the education sector – one example being King Abdullah Economic City, an industrial and residential development on the kingdom’s west coast. These “pockets of reform” are isolated from the bureaucratic interference. However, while this bureaucratic layering reflects the regime’s new accommodation of liberal elites, it also indicates a reluctance to confront head on religious interests in main education institutions, such as the MoHE.

Without an ability to tackle entrenched interests in a

more systemic manner, therefore, broad-based institutional reform is likely to remain gradual and limited. While high-profile “pockets of reform” may be initiated under the direct guidance of the regime – and could have a long term impact in stretching public perceptions of the permissibility of certain reforms – the ability for these pilot projects to trickle down into the broader system remains significantly constrained.

EDUCATION REFORM IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT: THE CASES OF QATAR AND THE UAE

Qatar and the UAE have much smaller populations than Saudi Arabia and do not rely on a formal ulema establishment for legitimacy. However, they are rentier states that rely on the distribution of oil wealth in return for loyalty as they deal with forces of rapid globalization and the impact of accelerated development.

Both Qatar and the UAE have implemented a variety of education reform initiatives in the past ten years to address the severe disconnect between their educational systems and increasingly globalized labor markets. Qatar has pursued a dramatic transformation of its entire education system from K-12 through higher education since 2001. As a federated state the UAE has a diversity of models at work, from free zones in Dubai to Abu Dhabi's more statist approach with selective private partnerships.

This section will seek to answer why and how these oil monarchies have pursued different education reform models, the relative success of these models, and the implications for wider reform efforts.

Qatar

In many ways, Qatar functions without the ideological or resource constraints of Saudi Arabia, given that it has a per capita GDP over five times⁷⁴ that of Saudi Arabia and no formal ulema establishment. As such, its accelerated reform process reflects both the possibilities and limits of bureaucratic transformation in a Gulf monarchy.

Qatar became an independent state upon the withdrawal of the British from the Gulf in 1971.⁷⁵ While

Qatar is an oil monarchy, its demographic structure, small population, and wealth per citizen all serve to differentiate it from its larger neighbor Saudi Arabia. Qatar holds the world's third largest natural gas reserves and is the single largest supplier of liquefied natural gas.⁷⁶ With its population of approximately 250,000 Qataris, Qatar has the world's highest GDP per capita. For these reasons, the Qatari government faces few financial restraints and limited social pressures.⁷⁷ The government is able to provide a range of social benefits to its citizens, including public sector employment, free education and healthcare, and subsidized utilities.⁷⁸

The Al-Thani family is the primary political force in the country, and historically has been the only substantial source of political opposition to a reigning emir. Neither merchant families nor the religious establishment have acquired enough clout to form secondary centers of political opposition for a variety of historical and demographic reasons.⁷⁹ Indeed, the current emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, came to power via a bloodless coup to unseat his aging father in 1995.⁸⁰

Since then, Qatar has pursued a variety of economic, social, as well as limited political reforms.⁸¹ In 1998 the Ministry of Information was abolished, signaling

74 "Libya and Middle East Crisis in Graphics," Thomson Reuters, August 28, 2011, <<http://graphics.thomsonreuters.com/11/02/MiddleEast.html>>.

75 Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Ithaca Press, 1998), 19-31.

76 U.S. Energy Information and Administration, "Country Analysis: Qatar," <<http://www.eia.doe.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=QA>>.

77 Otto Pohl, "Social Change; By Degrees: Qatar Opens up by Importing Universities," *International Herald Tribune*, March 25, 2005.

78 Andrew Rathmell and Kirsten Schulze, "Political Reform in the Gulf: The Case of Qatar," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36, no.4 (October 2000): 47-62.

79 Mehran Kamrava, "Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalization in Qatar," *Middle East Journal*, 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009), 401-420.

80 Ibid.

81 "Qatar's Liberalization Drive Wins Applause," *Mideast Mirror*, May 9, 1997.

a move towards greater press freedoms.⁸² Qatar officially became a constitutional monarchy through an April 2003 referendum.⁸³ The constitution officially grants women the right to vote and run for national office and provides for an elected shura council. The promised national elections for the advisory council, however, have been repeatedly delayed, though municipal elections did take place in May 2011.⁸⁴

A disproportionate number of Qatari nationals – approximately 83 percent – are employed in the public sector.⁸⁵ As a World Economic Forum report on Qatar’s economic competitiveness noted, one of the most fundamental challenges Qatar faces is the quality of its education system. Similar to other GCC states, Qatar inherited a centralized and highly bureaucratic traditional education system that produced low technical skills, thus hindering the ability of graduates to meet the demands of the emerging labor market.⁸⁶

Similar to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, education in Qatar was largely informal until the second half of the 20th century.⁸⁷ Since becoming emir, Sheikh Hamad has pursued an ambitious project of investing in human capital, particularly through transforming the country’s education system.

Qatar Foundation and Education City

At the World Innovation Summit for Education, Sheikh Abdullah Ali Al-Thani in his opening address stated that, “We have the will and the resources both to carry our reforms through and to be a pioneer in the theory and practice of education, not just locally

but also regionally and internationally.”⁸⁸ Reflecting this vision, the Qatar Foundation (QF) was founded in 1995 to help Qatar “transition from a carbon economy to knowledge economy by unlocking human potential.”⁸⁹ Sheikh Hamad’s second wife, Sheikha Moza – who serves as QF’s chairperson – is a primary driver of education reform, and serves a highly visible role as a figurehead for reform, unusual for a female in the Gulf.⁹⁰

QF’s budget relies heavily on donations by the royal family,⁹¹ though it is also partially funded through profit-making branches such as Vodaphone-Qatar.⁹² In many ways QF functions as a parallel social ministry, albeit with a private sector model of management and competition.⁹³ It is the institution behind Qatar’s most high profile education experiment, Education City, which serves as a platform for a network of branch campuses of internationally prominent university degree and research programs.

With a multi-billion dollar price tag,⁹⁴ Education City is the most internationally prominent education venture in the region. A 2,500 acre complex, it houses seven branch degree programs from several U.S. universities including the Cornell-Weill Cornell Medical College, Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, Texas A&M University, Carnegie Mellon University’s Computer Science Program, and Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism. Each branch school maintains academic independence and

82 Rathmell and Schulze, “Political Reform in the Gulf.”

83 Kamrava, “Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalization.”

84 Ibid.

85 Census of Population, Housing and Establishments, 2010

86 World Bank, “Shaping the Future: A Long-Term Perspective of People and Job Mobility for the Middle East and North Africa,” (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2008), <<http://go.worldbank.org/YOUKBKTCE0>>. See also, Zamila Bunglawala, “Nurturing a Knowledge Economy in Qatar,” Brookings Doha Center Policy Briefing, September 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2011/09_qatar_bunglawala.aspx>.

87 Sheikh Hamad was himself educated in the United Kingdom and graduated from Sandhurst Military Academy and Cambridge University.

88 “Doha to host global summit on education,” *Straits Times*, March 2009.

89 Qatar Foundation, “History,” <<http://www.qf.org.qa/news-center/press-room/faqs/faqs?t=316&>>.

90 Danna Harman, “An American Education Thriving...in Qatar,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 22, 2007.

91 See “Qatar Foundation Mission,” <www.qf.edu.qa>.

92 Qatar Foundation Press Release, “Vodafone and Qatar Foundation Take First Steps Towards Launch of Vodafone Qatar,” <<http://www.vodafone.com.qa/go/pressrelease/vodafone-and-qatar-foundation-take-first-steps-towards-launch-of-vodafone-qatar>>.

93 Author’s interview with Qatar Foundation (QF) Official, Doha, Qatar, February 2011.

94 Estimates for the construction of Education City are not public, but the teaching and research hospital for Cornell medical school alone is to be funded by an \$8 billion government endowment.

awards degrees from the home institution.⁹⁵

Education City stands out as a bold experiment in international education. Hosting western branch campuses has challenged several cultural norms, sparking both praise and criticism in the wider Gulf region. Unlike public educational institutions in Qatar, all campuses and programs in Education City are co-educational and the English-only curriculums, with the exception of Islamic Studies, are entirely determined by the parent institution.

However, with a total enrollment of approximately 1,400 students, of which fewer than 700 are Qatari, Education City is not designed to accommodate the vast majority of Qatari secondary school graduates seeking higher education. As one education analyst involved put it, “Education city’s purpose is to establish new institutions, not reform the old ones.”⁹⁶ For this reason, Education City is often viewed as an expensive bubble, disconnected from the wider educational landscape in Qatar. Negative publicity in the local press tends to focus on Education City as a secular endeavor, tied in to the United States.

Indeed, many Qatari educators interviewed pointed to the difference in funding between Education City and Qatar University as representative of the difference between high profile prestige projects geared towards an international audience and genuine systemic change in higher education. As one Qatari education administrator said of the relationship between Education City and Qatar University, “It is not meant for the average Qatari, it is meant for the international community. It is a diplomatic effort.”⁹⁷

However, much like the management of KAUST in Saudi Arabia, backers of Education City see it as a beacon for future economic and social reforms. Explaining how Education City fits into the larger

landscape of liberalization in Qatar, one QF official stated, “Schools such as the Medill journalism school will make an impact in society over time. The more educated they are, the more journalists will push, will inquire, will refuse censorship, self or otherwise. They will push for change in a broad sense. It will be organic.”⁹⁸

Though Qatar Foundation is technically a non-governmental organization, it is, for all intents and purposes, a royal initiative. Like most of the country’s high profile education reforms, QF features little broader societal participation. Whether Education City will remain a bubble of international education or generate gradual momentum and wider leadership for greater societal and political reform remains to be seen. To fully understand the landscape of higher education reform in Qatar, it is therefore necessary to move beyond Education City to Qatar University, which enrolls approximately 97 percent of all Qatari secondary school graduates.

Qatar University

Qatar University (QU), established in 1977, has gender segregated campuses, though unlike in Saudi Arabia’s public universities, both male and female faculty and staff are present at each. In August 2003, the emir Sheikh Hamad, who at the time was also the Supreme Head of Qatar University, appointed Sheikha Al-Misnad as its new president and commissioned the American think tank RAND-Qatar Policy Institute (RQPI) to help design and implement a major initiative to reform the institution.

Prior to the university reform initiative, QU functioned essentially as a ministry under the central government. All budget allocations had to be approved by the Ministry of Finance while all staffing and organization changes had to be approved by the Ministry of Civil Service Affairs and Housing.⁹⁹ This rigid centralization of decision-making was common throughout the Qatari government in the 1990s. Thus, one of the most significant reforms for the university

95 “Doha to host global summit on education; Forum in September to boost Qatar’s position as a hub in the Middle East,” *Straits Times*, March 2009.

96 Author’s interview with education policy analyst, Doha, Qatar, March 2011.

97 Author’s interview with QU Department Chair, Doha Qatar, January 2011.

98 Author’s interview with QF Official, Doha, Qatar, February 2011.

99 Ibid.

was Sheikh Hamad's decision to devolve his role as the head of QU. This move, in combination with a separation of QU's annual funding from that of other higher education initiatives, granted the university independence from the Qatari central government for the first time since its establishment.¹⁰⁰

However, while Sheikh Hamad officially transferred his oversight of the university to a board of trustees in 2004, QU does not have an endowment and remains funded on an annual basis by the Qatari government. In practice this means that QU remains dependent on informal sway with the regime for increased funding allocations.

Another challenging aspect for Qatar University is addressing what it means to be a national university in an increasingly globalized higher education landscape. In terms of curricular reform, there has been a dual push to emphasize research and make English the medium of instruction in all post-graduate degrees (with the exception of Islamic studies).¹⁰¹ The introduction of English instruction has proven difficult for many students who are not yet proficient in the language, and, according to some critics of the reform process, diminishes the social and religious roles of the university in national life.

Other significant challenges include the pace of reform. According to individuals involved with the Qatar University reforms, the direct support of the emir was critical to initiate and implement the large scale reorganization of the university in the face of bureaucratic resistance. Among the opposition to proposed reforms included faculty who would be affected by the changes, as well as some students. A Qatar University professor described how rapid change had been disorienting, stating,

Yes, we are looking to be a part of the world, but we can't just forget our past, our history, social relations and social behavior... There needs to be more inclusion of native Qataris as part of

the change. There is a feeling that it is expatriate driven... We need to bring the Qataris with us, because it is our country, our society. We need to bring the educated elites along.¹⁰²

Sheikha Misnad, the president of Qatar University, addressed the criticism of the fast pace of reform, stating that, "Everything around us has changed, the whole thing has changed and the new generation has changed. We must change too."¹⁰³

To date, the reform of Qatar University has been partially implemented. There have been significant organizational changes, including the promotion of younger professors and a renewed concentration on research through linkages with the Qatar National Research Foundation.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the Emiri Diwan has commissioned several community colleges in the past five years to focus on providing vocational education, allowing QU to focus more exclusively on undergraduate education.

In terms of the impact of the larger landscape of reform, several QU faculty members cited Education City as a positive force in pressuring Qatar University to accelerate its development. However, there also exists a sense of imbalance of emphasis between the two projects. As one professor said, "Qatar University is always being told to participate in Education City. But Qatar University is the only national university, it is 37 years old. They have to come to us as well."¹⁰⁵ The reform of Qatar University highlights the difficulties inherent in separating once centralized institutions from government authority. The patchwork of reforms to the university's curriculum and structure, under the guidance of RAND, also point to the thorny, long term challenges of transforming a nationally prominent institution without seeming to abandon the societal and cultural role of the institution in national life.

100 Author's interview with Sheikha Al-Misnad, President, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar, March 2011.

101 Ibid.

102 Author's interview with QU Department Chair, Doha, Qatar, January 2011.

103 Author's interview with Sheikha Al-Misnad, President, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar, March 2011.

104 Ibid.

105 Author's interview with QU Department Chair, Doha, Qatar, January 2011.

K-12 Education Reform: Independent Schools Model

One of the most dramatic education reforms initiated under Sheikh Hamad - the decentralization of the K-12 education system – captures the struggle between top-down monarchy-controlled reform and expanding the social stakeholders in the education system. K-12 education is often far more difficult to reform than tertiary education due to the direct impact it has on the widest swath of society. As one Qatari education reformer put it, “Everybody is a stakeholder in primary education in Qatar.”¹⁰⁶

In 1995 Sheikh Hamad appointed a committee of seven prominent Qataris to examine the performance of K-12 and post-secondary education with an eye towards transforming it into an internationally competitive system.¹⁰⁷ The minister of education was fired and replaced with a technocratic reformer. However, by 2001, despite several years of study, the education system remained stagnant. When a further internal effort to re-galvanize K-12 reform later that year also petered out, the Emir, as one Qatari official put it, “started to look outside the [MoE] system for reform ideas.”¹⁰⁸ In 2001, RAND was commissioned to conduct a “quiet review” to evaluate the current K-12 education system and propose reform alternatives.

Based on RAND’s evaluation, three models of system wide transformation were proposed. The first model proposed the immediate dissolution of the Ministry of Education in favor of a complete decentralization of K-12 schools via privatization; the second model proposed a phased transition to independent schools over several years as the education bureaucracy slowly transitioned; and the third model proposed retaining the Ministry of Education and working within it to initiate vigorous reforms. Sheikh Hamad and the reform committee chose the second model.

The model of phased transition was chosen to allow the regime greater time to deal with the political and logistical ramifications of dismantling an education bureaucracy which was seen as hierarchical, overly bureaucratic, and resistant to innovation. In its place a parallel bureaucratic structure, the Supreme Education Council (SEC), would be created to oversee the implementation of an independent school model with the understanding that the SEC and independent school model would, over the course of ten years, come to replace the MoE and centralized school system.¹⁰⁹ These independent schools would be state funded and function like U.S. charter schools, to provide increased accountability for performance, variety, and choice for parents and students in Qatar.

The SEC was established in 2003 with Crown Prince Tamim Al-Thani as Chair and Sheikha Moza designated as the Vice Chair, signaling the emir’s commitment to the initiative. In a *Washington Post* interview, the Director of RAND-Qatar’s education unit stated, “These changes are consistent with the emir’s vision of the country...Changes like more openness in the economy, entrepreneurship, and ultimately democracy require a population that’s used to these things. This was the opportunity to really build a model school system, to combine the best elements from around the world.”¹¹⁰ However, this sudden shift from an entirely centralized educational system to decentralized independent schools prior to widespread community engagement resulted in several challenges, including social attitudes towards the change, inefficiencies and disparities in the new schools, and unclear and inconsistent administrative procedures.

Not surprisingly, K-12 reform proved to be more culturally sensitive than higher education reform. The SEC recommended that English instruction become mandatory from the first grade on and math and science courses be taught entirely in English. Most controversially, Islamic studies and Arabic courses

106 Author’s interview with Ministry of Finance/Education 2002/3 committee member, Doha, Qatar, February 2011.

107 Author’s interview with Darwish al-Emadi, member of the original education reform commission and former SEC President, Doha, Qatar, January 2011.

108 Author’s interview with Evaluation Institute official, Doha, Qatar, February 2011.

109 RAND, *Education for a New Era: Design and Implementation of K-12 Education Reform in Qatar*, (Qatar: RAND, 2007).

110 Susan B. Glasser, “Qatar Reshapes Its Schools, Putting English Over Islam; Conservatives See Reform as extension of U.S. Influence in Gulf,” *The Washington Post*, February 2, 2003.

were to be cut back.¹¹¹ Negative press characterized the use of western consultants and the new curricular specifications as an attack on traditional Qatari identity and Islam's role in the social fabric. The reforms also attracted criticism from around the Gulf. A leading Saudi newspaper, *Al-Watan*, claimed the program was being led by a "Jewish foundation," as it described RAND,¹¹² while several religious leaders termed it "forced secularization."¹¹³

Meanwhile, the lack of prior substantive engagement with various stakeholders led to a bureaucratic backlash – particularly from the MoE, the largest employer of Qatari nationals. Another persistent challenge was the lack of trained teachers and staff. The successful implementation of new curriculums designed to meet international standards depended on the quality of classroom instruction. While Qatar has sought to hire extensively from abroad to meet short-term English language instruction needs, for the reform to take hold and be culturally acceptable, the training of Qatari teaching staff must be a priority.

Public dissatisfaction, in combination with little progress in international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), led to a gradual re-centralization of government control under the new Supreme Education Council (SEC). Thus, while the initial restructuring of the K-12 system was intended to grant greater autonomy to schools, the extent of the challenge and the lack of clear guidelines undermined community confidence in the reform efforts. As one SEC official stated, "Right now we are back in a centralized system, but we don't want to admit it... the reform needs a reform."¹¹⁴ As another education administrator noted, "The political will is there, the financial support is there, but what is missing is the

right set-up and human resources. We need a clarification of vision."¹¹⁵

This recentralization of education under the SEC points to the bureaucratic challenges involved in education reform even in the absence of organized opposition or interest groups. Rapid reform without substantial prior societal engagement created social and economic complications that led to the government's backtracking, including curricular reversals and administrative recentralization. The pace of reform is also dependent on the capacity of the system to provide adequate training to educators and administrators, without which curricular reforms, existing on paper, will not translate into improvements in the classroom.

Analysis of Qatar's Education Reforms

Of the three Gulf monarchies studied, Qatar has taken the most dramatic and definitive steps to transform its education system. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar has been able to design and rapidly implement widespread institutional changes in both its K-12 and higher education system. The Qatari Emir has placed his political will and visible support behind a range of experimental and ambitious reforms, outpacing demands from society and even many liberal elites. However, the implementation of planned institutional reform has faced an array of logistical and social challenges, including the lack of adequately trained staff and significant societal push-back.

As mentioned earlier, Qatar does not have a tradition of the religious establishment acting as a guarantor of legitimacy. Although Qatar does, on a social level, embrace some of the mores of Wahhabism, the religious establishment has been politically neutralized and does not play a significant role in political decisions.¹¹⁶ Without opposition groups to appease, it has been possible for reform to be initiated through an entirely top-down process, with Sheikh Hamad and Sheikha Moza as its driving force. Indeed, several scholars and close observers have pointed to Qatar's

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 "Abu Yahya al-Libi Criticizes Saudi Scholars, Western Education in Saudi Arabia," OSC summary of Jihadist Websites, February 6, 2010. Available from World News Connection.

114 Author's interview with member of the Supreme Education Council, Doha, Qatar, February 2011.

115 Ibid.

116 Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States* 99-105.

liberalization project as aimed towards raising its global prestige and international prominence – an important element of the regime’s legitimacy – rather than being driven by internal demand.¹¹⁷

However, even without organized opposition groups, education reform in Qatar has faced several significant challenges. The existing bureaucratic structures of the state, such as the Ministry of Education, proved more resilient to change than anticipated. The royal family’s direct involvement in reform efforts at critical junctures was needed to provide the requisite momentum to overcome internal resistance. Cultural objections have also had to be taken into greater account, as shown with the reinstatement of Islamic studies and Arabic as mandatory facets of the independent schools’ curriculum. The case of Qatar, then, makes it clear that even where there is significant political will, failing to engage broad sections of society in education reform can leave it mired in backlash.

The United Arab Emirates: The Case of Abu Dhabi and Dubai

The UAE is a small Gulf monarchy of approximately eight million, of which only around 11.5 percent are UAE nationals, with the remaining majority being expatriate workers and their dependents.¹¹⁸ Following Qatar’s ambitious reforms, the UAE has also moved to transform its education system. The federated nature of the state has allowed for a diversity of education reform models to be employed in different emirates, with Dubai’s free market approach at one end of the spectrum and Abu Dhabi’s centralized autocratic reform at the other.

The UAE is composed of seven former trical states: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwan, and Fujairah. Each emirate has varying degrees of power and influence within

the federation, with Abu Dhabi and Dubai being the most prominent. The UAE’s relatively open borders and economy, symbolized by Dubai at the height of its status as a financial center, co-exist with an autocratic political structure composed of ruling families and tribal elites. Power rests mainly in the hands of a president from the wealthiest and most powerful emirate of Abu Dhabi and a prime minister from the commercial and trading powerhouse Dubai, as well as a Supreme Council composed of the emirs of all seven states.¹¹⁹ A partially elected Federal National Council (FNC) was established in 2006 as an advisory body to the Supreme Council; it has 40 members, half of whom are voted in through a limited election.¹²⁰ The second ever such election, in which only a hand-picked 12 percent of Emirati nationals were able to vote, took place in September 2011.¹²¹ The vote – along with other recent gestures towards political liberalization – is widely viewed as circumscribed and superficial.

Recent shifts in global markets have greatly affected the less oil rich emirates. The 2008-2009 global financial crisis particularly hurt Dubai’s real estate dependent economy, and necessitated a bail out from oil-rich Abu Dhabi. This setback in Dubai’s economic status reverberated throughout the federated structure of the UAE affecting its relative power vis-à-vis Abu Dhabi and its ability to pursue its own economic and political model separate from the broader confederation.¹²² In addition, the gap in living standards between the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai and the other emirates has become more pronounced in the past decade.¹²³

117 Andrew Rathmell and Kirsten Schulze, “Political Reform in the Gulf: The Case of Qatar,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 4 (October 2000): 47-62.

118 UAE National Bureau of Statistics, “2010 National Report,” <<http://www.uaestatistics.gov.ae/ReportPDF/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9%202006%20-%202010.pdf>>.

119 Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*, 107-125.

120 Economist Intelligence Unit, “UAE Country Report,” April 2011, <http://country.eiu.com/FileHandler.ashx?issue_id=1027937487&mode=pdf>.

121 Mahmoud Habboush, “UAE nationals ask: Why can’t we all vote?” Reuters, September 21, 2011, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/21/us-emirates-elections-campaign-idUSTRE78K33F20110921>>.

122 Liz Alderman, “Dubai Keeps Building, But More Soberly, After Financial Crisis,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2010.

123 Kenneth Katzman, “The United Arab Emirates: Issues for U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Services Report (Washington, D.C., March 10, 2011).

In the less affluent northern emirates, the discrepancy in standards of infrastructure and social services in comparison to Abu Dhabi and Dubai is substantial.¹²⁴ The education zones of Umm al-Qaiwain, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, and Fujairah all operate under the federal Ministry of Education which allocates an annual budget to each. However, education officials have complained that without significant increases in federal allocations, they will be left behind.¹²⁵

Similar to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, approximately 90 percent of all working UAE nationals are employed in the public sectors, often with disproportionately high wages.¹²⁶ The state's distribution of jobs and benefits, however, has begun to come under significant strain, particularly since the financial crisis. Unemployment has reached an average of 14 percent and youth unemployment is estimated at 30 percent.¹²⁷ In response to the looming jobs crisis, the UAE government recently decreed that nationals must make up at least 20 percent of a company's workforce, irrespective of sector.¹²⁸ However, despite efforts to promote Emiratization, the private sector views the national workforce as lacking the requisite high-level skills to compete in a globalized labor market.

As with other Gulf states, a modern education system in the UAE is a relatively recent phenomenon. Under the leadership of the founder of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed, school enrollment was expanded throughout the emirates in the 1960s and 1970s. While the Emirati constitution, adopted in 1971, provides each emirate with the right to develop its own social and economic development plans, in practice autonomy from the federal institutions exists only for Abu Dhabi and to a declining degree Dubai.

124 Afshan Ahmed, "Northern Schools Seek Cash Reforms," *The National*, April 3, 2011

125 Ibid.

126 Economist Intelligence Unit, "UAE Country Report," April 2011, <http://country.eiu.com/FileHandler.ashx?issue_id=1027937487&mode=pdf>.

127 Ibid.

128 Ibid.

These different levels of autonomy from the federation are visible in the separate education models pursued in each emirate. Due to their independent sources of financing and influence, separate bureaucratic entities oversee education in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi with varying levels of connection to federal institutions, namely the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) and the Ministry of Education (MoE). For example, the Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC), the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), and the federal ministries of education are all tasked with reforming the education system. In addition all K-12 government schools in the UAE, with the exception of schools in Abu Dhabi, are controlled by the MoE. Private schools throughout the emirates, with the exception of those operating in the free zones of Dubai, are licensed by the federal MoE. The creation of independent or semi-autonomous administrative bodies like the Knowledge and Human Development Authority in Dubai and the Abu Dhabi Education Council has given rise to a complicated landscape of education reform actors in the UAE, where federal and emirate-level bodies are often seen as competing for resources and control.

Higher Education

All federal institutions of higher education are free for UAE nationals. They consist of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), UAE University, and Sheikh Zayed University. Each federal institution is open to both genders and segregated at the undergraduate level.¹²⁹ As of 2010, 16,000 UAE nationals were enrolled in HCT; 12,000 at UAE University; 2,000 at Zayed University; and 5,000 in private educational institutions or overseas.¹³⁰ While the majority of UAE secondary students enroll in the federal universities, an increasing number opt to attend private institu-

129 Faculty and staff are mixed genders. Some graduate programs are also mixed gender. Author's interview Department Head, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, UAE, February 2011.

130 See "Education in the UAE," Embassy of the UAE in Washington, DC, <http://www.uae-embassy.org/uae/education>; See also Stewart Godwin, "Globalization, Education and Emiratization: A Study of the United Arab Emirates," *Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries*, 27, no. 1(2006), 1-14, <<http://www.ejisdc.org/ojs2/index.php/ejisdc/article/viewFile/195/177>>.

tions of higher education, of which 60 percent are for-profit with varying degrees of quality.¹³¹

In 2006, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al-Nahyan, a member of the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, was placed in charge of the higher education sector in the UAE. Sheikh Nahyan also serves as chancellor of two of the UAE's three government-sponsored institutions of higher learning, underlining the centralized nature of higher education.

Transforming the higher education sector in the UAE has posed several challenges. Federal institutions such as UAE University are currently seeking to move from an Egyptian style of higher education with an emphasis on memorization to a more “Western-style” interactive style. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, a growing number of classes are taught in English, although the curriculum remains predominantly in Arabic.¹³²

In recent years, several high-profile international branch campuses, such as NYU-Abu Dhabi, the Sorbonne, and INSEAD, which serve mainly a foreign student body and together enroll fewer than 1000 Emirati students, have been established in Abu Dhabi. They enjoy the direct backing of Sheikh Khalifa, the financial support of the Abu Dhabi government, and do not operate on a for-profit basis.¹³³ Similar to Qatar's Education City, these high profile international institutions function more as a source of national prestige and a means of attracting enhanced human capital to promote Abu Dhabi's transformation to a knowledge economy, rather than as drivers of education reform at the national level. In addition to the federal universities and high-profile international branch campuses in Abu Dhabi, semi-private institutions such as Abu Dhabi University, Khalifa University, and MAS-DAR enjoy varying levels of royal support and are

designed to promote linkages between the labor market and knowledge economy sectors.

Unlike in Abu Dhabi, private higher education institutions operating in Dubai's free zones are not required to be licensed by MoHESR, although some opt for it.¹³⁴ Mirroring its free-market strategy for soliciting business investment, Dubai created several “free zones” for private education entrepreneurs to operate in, including Dubai Knowledge Village and Academic City. These multi-university complexes enjoy loose regulatory standards and minimum government interference in order to attract a variety of institutions. As of 2010, more than 25 universities were located, or planning to be located, in these special Free Zones, the majority of which operate on a for-profit model. However, degrees from unlicensed institutions are not recognized by UAE federal ministries. Thus, while federal accreditation of institutions operating in Dubai's free zones remains voluntary, the UAE government will not recognize degrees from non-accredited institutions for federal employment. As a result, private higher education institutions which do not seek accreditation cater primarily to non-nationals.

Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi remains the leading power within the federation. Home to 42 percent of all Emiratis, its massive oil reserves provide it with two thirds of the UAE's wealth.¹³⁵ In recent years, particularly following the financial crisis in Dubai, Abu Dhabi has played an increasingly assertive role in the federation even as it seeks to establish emirate-level educational institutions independent from federal ministry lines of authority.¹³⁶

The main institutional body responsible for the re-

131 Author's interview with Dr. Badr Aboul-Ela, Director Commission for Academic Accreditation, MoHESR official, Abu Dhabi, UAE, February 2011.

132 Author's interview with high-level administrator, UAE, Al-Ain, UAE, February 2011.

133 Author's interviews with various private university administrators, Abu Dhabi, UAE, February 2011.

134 Author's interview with Dr. Badr Aboul-Ela, Director Commission for Academic Accreditation, MoHESR official, Abu Dhabi, UAE, February 2011.

135 Vivian Salama, “United Arab Emirates Population Rises 65% Over Four Years,” *Bloomberg News*, March 31, 2011, <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-31/united-arab-emirates-population-increases-65-over-four-years.html>>.

136 Author's interview with UAE University provost, Al-Ain, UAE, March 2011.

form of Abu Dhabi's education system is the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), established by the Emir of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa in 2005.¹³⁷ ADEC is tasked with transforming the entire education system in Abu Dhabi. ADEC, similar to SAGIA in Saudi Arabia, partners with the private sector to modernize facilities, reduce bureaucracy, and improve and innovate curricula at all levels.¹³⁸

One of the most prominent ADEC initiatives is the "New School Model," launched in 2010. The New School Model constitutes a whole cloth reengineering of the K-12 curriculum, emphasizing bilingual Arabic and English education in public schools, with subjects such as mathematics and science taught solely in English.¹³⁹ Through the creation of emirate-level institutions such as ADEC, Abu Dhabi has created a parallel structure of emirate-level bureaucratic authority with little to no coordination with federal institutions. According to one education analyst in Abu Dhabi, ADEC was created because, "The federal structure has its own history and baggage. Abu Dhabi cannot reform the federated structure, so it is overwhelming it."¹⁴⁰

Dubai

In contrast to Abu Dhabi's centrally regulated and coordinated approach to education reform, albeit at the individual emirate level, Dubai has pursued a free market approach to education, opting to rely on decentralization and privatization to spur educational change.

137 The Abu Dhabi Education Council was established on September 10, 2005, in accordance with Law No. 24 enacted by His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, UAE President, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and Ruler of Abu Dhabi. The chairman of ADEC is His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, and the Vice Chairman is HH Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Minister of Presidential Affairs. See "Abu Dhabi Education Council History," <http://www.abudhabi.ae/egovPoolPortal_WAR/appmanager/ADeGP/Citizen?_nfpb=true&_pageLabel=p_citizen_departments&did=121674&lang> .

138 Kathryn Lewis, "Education Reform Plan Thrown Open for comment," *The National*, November 6, 2008.

139 Afshan Ahmed, "Subjects Cut in Overhaul of Public Schools," *The National*, April 6, 2011.

140 Author's interview with academic administrator, UAE U, Al-Ain, UAE, February 2011.

Under the leadership of the Maktoum family and with limited natural resources, Dubai has largely operated independently from the federation, building its wealth through commercial ventures. To do so, Dubai has enticed private sector investment and FDI through the creation of numerous free zones which allow for 100 percent foreign ownership of commercial ventures.¹⁴¹

At the K-12 level, Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) oversees education, both private and public, having taken over the role from the Dubai Education Council in 2007. Under KHDA, the "Dubai Schools" initiative was launched to develop international primary and secondary education in Dubai by promoting the establishment of high-quality internationally-accredited schools. Schools operating under the "Dubai Schools" umbrella are established as branch campuses of international schools or as new institutions offering various international curricula. The downside to this loose regulatory framework is that substandard diploma mills established as commercial ventures have flourished in the free zones, resulting in closer scrutiny and regulation by the MoHESR.

Dubai's free market approach to education reform has also been imperiled by its recent financial woes. As private sector revenue has decreased, Dubai has increasingly relied on Abu Dhabi for financial support. As a result, federal institutions, such as the MoHESR, are exerting an increased authority over the education sector in Dubai.¹⁴² While emirate level institutions such as KHDA still exist, they increasingly work in tandem with the federated institutions of education, calling into question the viability of its decentralized and deregulated education reform model.

Implications for Institutional Reform

The UAE presents an interesting mixed case of reform. While it is a small state, the division in wealth

141 Economist Intelligence Unit, "UAE Country Report."

142 Afshan Ahmed, "Minister Hails 'Major' Reform of Education," *The National*, October 26, 2010; also author's background interviews with various diplomatic officials.

between the different emirates and its federated structure allow for a variety of reform models to function simultaneously. At one end of the spectrum lies Dubai's free market privatization approach to education, and at the other, the centralized authority of the Al-Nahyan family in Abu Dhabi exerting autocratic reform through emirate level institutions.

Especially after the financial crisis of 2009 rocked Dubai, Abu Dhabi is likely to increase its control over the other emirates. Abu Dhabi's wealth has allowed it to both create a parallel system of institutions to route around older ministries, as exemplified by ADEC, while at the same time exerting increasing control over federal institutions and through them the other emirates. This trend suggests that future bureaucratic reform will gravitate towards Abu Dhabi's more centralized model of control, rather than Dubai's free market approach which is already coming under greater regulatory oversight by the federal ministries.

The relocation of the Gulf Research Center from Dubai to Geneva in June 2011, following objections from Dubai's Department of Economic Development over the center's output, is indicative of the extent of governmental (either federal or emirate-level) control over spheres of research and education. Meanwhile, the comparative clout and importance of Abu Dhabi and its federal institutions is reflected in other spheres. Pioneering efforts by for instance Sharjah – which introduced an internal consultative council as early as 1999 – remain of peripheral importance as compared to the Federal National Council.

Given the limited political push-back to the centralization of education reform in Abu Dhabi, it is likely that autocratic reform of institutions without increased societal outreach will continue for the near future and expand throughout the UAE.

CONCLUSION

In an increasingly integrated global economy, the flexibility, adaptability and quality of national education systems are central to driving economic competitiveness and growth. Oil wealth has allowed each monarchy to employ a large percentage of its citizens in the public sector. This has unsurprisingly led to the decreased dynamism of public sector institutions over time, all while youth unemployment rates have skyrocketed. Each Gulf monarchy possesses a complex mix of religious, tribal, and historical factors that constitute its ruling authority. However, the ability of the monarchies to transform key public sectors to meet the rapid social and technological challenges of the globalized economy is increasingly a new and shared legitimacy challenge.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE face many of the same challenges in aligning their education sectors with labor market needs: unwieldy bureaucracies, the legacy of a welfare system based largely on oil rents, and the careful need to balance the forces of globalization with national and local identity and culture – particularly in the delicate areas of language of instruction, religious studies, and curricular reform. To rapidly transform sectors such as higher education requires each regime to navigate around entrenched bureaucratic and social interests. Education reform in the Gulf then becomes a politically charged endeavour with potential winners and losers among various co-opted groups as each regime struggles to transition from highly centralized and rigid bureaucracies to more responsive, innovative, and dynamic systems.

To promote education reform, all three states have experimented with varying levels of decentralization and privatization. Privatization is one area where reform is difficult to reverse and indeed can have a transformative effect on the education system as a whole. While privatization alone is not a guarantee

of high quality education, it allows an expanded political space for elites to initiate curricular reforms which may be too controversial for the monarchy to support directly. Decentralization of education reform creates a range of models – some successful, some less so – that can be built upon and embraced either through parental choice or gradual adaptation by national institutions.

Of the three Gulf monarchies studies, Qatar has taken the most dramatic and definitive steps to transform its education system. With no cohesive opposition groups, boldly implementing several pilot education reform projects and creating the most high profile western branch campus model in the region. The Qatari Emir has placed his political will behind a range of experimental and ambitious reforms, outpacing demands from society and even many liberal elites

Without cohesive opposition groups to appease, Qatari education reform at both the secondary and tertiary level has been initiated through an entirely top-down process, with Sheikh Hamad and Sheikha Moza as its driving force. However, as a result of the rapid pace of implementation and limited societal outreach, several aspects of the intended reform have become mired in unanticipated bureaucratic and social blowback. For example, the lack of prior substantive engagement with stakeholders in the education system prior to initiating the independent schools model led to substantial societal backlash upon implementation, resulting in a recentralization of administrative control. Meanwhile, human resources and teacher training continue to be major challenges to rapid implementation of widespread systemic reform.

The various emirates within the UAE have pursued different approaches to privatization, with Dubai

embracing an unfettered market approach and Abu Dhabi supporting a statist approach to education reform. Due to the financial crisis in Dubai, the more state-centric model led by Abu Dhabi is gaining influence as it asserts a greater role over the federal structure. Similar to Qatar, Abu Dhabi's model of education reform does not significantly expand avenues for greater societal participation. The process of generating and implementing education reform remains a fundamentally managed top-down process.

Unlike Qatar and the UAE, Saudi Arabia has avoided the foreign branch campus model. Its flagship higher education project, KAUST, is entirely Saudi but partners with international institutions. This model emphasizing national institutions is a result of the historic prominence of religion in the Saudi educational sphere – an element that has served as a legitimacy tool for the Al-Saud regime. The Saudi regime has attempted to initiate controversial education reforms without upsetting its legitimacy balance by creating new and peripheral institutions – such as academic cities, international partnerships, and quasi-governmental organizations – as a backdoor to reform. International accreditation and metrics also provide an external referent for regimes and liberal elites to use to press for politically sensitive curricular reforms. These strategies enable the regime to avoid directly challenging established institutions, such as the Ministries of Education, and their entrenched religious interests, while allowing business and technocratic elites a degree of political space to initiate controversial reforms.

The different education models pursued by the three GCC countries studied here suggests that demography, ideology, and resources all play an important role in determining the degree to which a monarchy is able, and willing, to pursue institutional innovation.

A shared tactic however is the use of new or outsider institutions, such as ADEC, Qatar Foundation, and Saudi Aramco, to circumvent a monarchy's turgid bureaucracy in order to rapidly implement high-profile pilot project reforms. However, a pilot project is one thing, systemic transformation is another.

In each of the countries studied, education reform has been largely formulated and implemented by each regime with little broader societal participation, which has often provoked an intense backlash. None of the states studied have encouraged direct societal participation in education reform. Bureaucratic circumvention can only go so far, however. Eventually each monarchy will need to reformulate its relationship with the various interest groups within the education sector to create sustainable institutional reform rather than one-off initiatives.

In terms of sustainability, all of the above changes can be reversed via executive fiat. In the smaller oil monarchies of Qatar and the UAE, the political will and financial resources to embrace wide-scale education reform are not an issue. Due to their demographics and the lack of organized political opposition, it is unlikely that the top-down reform model in either of these states will substantially change in near future. However, even with generous financial resources, Abu Dhabi and Qatar's education overhauls face real human resource challenges which limit the pace of implementation. An inability to train quickly and retain qualified teachers, especially in the new English language-only science and math curriculum has slowed the pace and scope of national reform. In Saudi Arabia, the largest and most influential of the Gulf monarchies, education reform remains a careful balancing act between appeasing the ulema, and a need to fast-track employment opportunities for youth in the private sector. The cost of back-tracking

on curricular reforms, both to the creation of private sector jobs and as a test of the monarchy's ability to transform its public sector, is high.

While it is too early to tell how creating more globally linked education standards and innovative institutions will transform the relationship between each monarchy and its citizens, it is likely that a more educated populace will demand increasingly responsive and dynamic public institutions. Whether the current model of "autocratic modernization" can deliver such dynamic and globally competitive institutions remains to be seen. As demonstrated by Abu Dhabi and Qatar, even with substantial political will and generous financial resources, education transformation will be a slow, uneven process.

The pathways of education reform that each monarchy has pursued have implications for wide-ranging institutional reform efforts in other bureaucratic sectors. As shown with the creation of education cities and parallel institutions to initiate controversial reforms, it is possible to rapidly implement model reforms through bureaucratic maneuvering. However, these efforts are largely bounded, and their ability to permeate through the rest of the system remains uncertain. Systemic and sustainable reform requires broader societal consultation and modes of participation to limit backlash and increase bureaucratic responsiveness. Without such mechanisms, education reform will likely remain superficial, and inadequate to the task.

ABOUT THE BROOKINGS DOHA CENTER

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