



Toward a National Education Development Paradigm in the Arab World: A Comparative Study of Saudi Arabia and Qatar

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Introduction

In today's knowledge-crazed world, education is the cornerstone of human development. While it is doubtful that education can stand alone in achieving this goal, it is certainly one of the most instrumental factors. The acquisition of knowledge gives humans a sense of freedom—the power to think—that in turn becomes a means to develop other types of freedom, including freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of political and economic participation.¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that many countries have identified education as one of the main priorities for developing their societies. More importantly, education is a universal concern for both developing and developed countries. Developing countries continually aspire to modernize their education systems, and developed countries pursue the adoption of the best education reforms and structure for their systems. In the end, all countries hope to gain from their education systems more effective citizens who can be productive participants, domestically and abroad, in markets and communities.

To understand how modernization efforts in education can work in one country, one must look at the foundations of an education system, how that system has evolved, and whether it can modernize within its present context. This paper seeks to

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explore such issues through a comparative case study of two countries in the Persian Gulf: Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. By examining the historical, cultural, economic and political contexts, this study aims to address why one country developed a comprehensive education reform system while the other chose a more cautious approach.

Education Development and the Arab World

Since September 11, 2001, the Arab world has been exposed to great scrutiny. Education has become a critical issue in defining a state of decline that exists in many Arab countries. While this part of the world is historically known as the cradle of scientific discovery and learning, it has largely failed to keep up. Even though Arab countries spend a higher percentage of GDP on education than any other developing region, the 2002 Arab Human Development Report stated that educational achievements in the Arab countries as a whole were still considered modest when compared to the rest of the world and even when compared to other developing countries.² Moreover, the Report estimated that approximately 40 percent of adult Arabs are illiterate, two-thirds of whom are women. While the 2002 Report emphasized the deficient qualitative nature of education systems in the Arab World, the 2003 Report highlighted that Arab countries, “lack[ed] an integrated vision of the education process and its objectives.”³ Furthermore, the report stated that the quality of education excludes quantitative resources and depends more on organizational aspects of the educational process, or means of delivery and evaluation. In addition to the region's growing knowledge gap, amongst the educated elite, roughly one-fourth of all university graduates,

emigrate to other countries, creating a large brain drain.

The Evolution of the Saudi and Qatari Education Systems

Prior to modern education, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, like their neighboring Gulf countries, followed a traditional form of education called *Kuttab*. Students in *Kuttab* schools learned through rote memorization,

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studying Quranic verses and religious principles. Beginning in the 1950s, a more formal education system was adopted in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The men's education system in both countries was divided into three stages: the primary stage (six years), intermediate stage (three years), and secondary stage (three

years). Girls' education was also included and funded by each respective government.

Today, the education policy in Saudi Arabia aims to promote the "belief in One God, Islam as the way of life, and Muhammad as God's Messenger."⁴ Similarly, and according to the Qatari Ministry of Education, Qatar's education policy builds on two notions: that Islam is Qatar's national religion and that Qatar's constitution is the country's source for laws and regulations.⁵

In Saudi Arabia, there are eight major universities, where five of them accept both male and female students. In Qatar, the major public higher education institution is Qatar University, which is currently undergoing major reform efforts to meet its government's objectives of raising academic qualifications and efficiency to confront the forces of modern change.

Educational Reform Initiatives at the National Level

Saudi Arabia

Over a year ago, the Interior Minister stated that the aim of the Saudi educational reform efforts is to enhance Islamic values and respect for the opinions of others. He denied reports that Saudi Arabia was under pressure from the United States to change the national curriculum. In addition, he said that the aim of Saudi education reform is to place more emphasis on scientific and technical

training to meet the future needs of the labor market.⁶

The need for higher education institutions in the country has been heightened since September 11, because many Saudi students have been rejected visas to study in the U.S. Additionally, the following reform initiatives were also adopted:

- A new process of evaluating and assessing the Saudi school curriculum by eliminating any possibly offensive language that promotes hate and intolerance towards the West from Saudi textbooks. The government claims that only 5 percent (some reports say 15 percent) of the curriculum has been deemed inappropriate or disturbing and that the material has been 'updated' and 'modernized'.⁷
- The creation of student councils in public schools in an effort to educate young Saudis "about civic responsibilities and participatory governance".⁸
- Opening up private higher education to foreign investment, as well as encouraging the establishment of private higher education institutions. Recently, the Arab Open University (AOU) has opened a campus in Jeddah.⁹ The student body is comprised of 25,000 students in three undergraduate programs. The university offers correspondence courses in computer science, information technology, English language, business administration and teacher training. Dr. Maha Abdullah Orkubi was appointed Dean of the University on October 2003, the first Saudi woman to ever hold a senior academic position.
- English language instruction: classes have been introduced to the sixth grade (instead of the seventh grade) in order to improve English skills at the intermediary and secondary school levels. This has been complemented with teacher-training programs to increase the amount of English teachers.
- Teacher training programs: The government has introduced two pilot programs, one in Jeddah and the other in Riyadh, for training teachers on innovative teaching methods.
- Expansion of technical and vocational education
- Class Server Project: the Ministry of Education and Microsoft Arabia have recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to bring improved Information, Computer and Communications Technologies (ICT) education to schools under Microsoft's 'Partners in Learning' global initiative.¹⁰ The agreement

includes teacher training, an e-learning gateway, a digital curriculum and data center.

- For girls' education colleges, the government has launched pilot programs in distance learning through the Internet in an effort to empower professional women and university graduates in Saudi Arabia with requisite skills, including information technology. The government has also started a training program for academic staff on WebCT programs for e-learning.

Qatar

Education for a New Era

In an effort to transform Qatari schools into a world-class education system, the Qatar has developed a groundbreaking education reform initiative known as Education for a New Era. The only one of its kind in the Arab world, this initiative has been praised worldwide as a revolutionary advance. Led by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Education for

a New Era (ENE) began in May 2001 and took a critical step towards the success of the larger social, economic, and political reform efforts currently taking place in Qatar.

The only short term objective of ENE is to build a "modern, world-class public school system" that will provide the Qatari children with the "best education possible."¹¹ The long term

goal is to "prepare future generations to be productive members of Qatari society and the world at large."¹² This transformation includes changing the existing rigid, centralized, and low-performing education system into a modern, decentralized (self-managed) and effective one.

The two key elements of this reform initiative are building new government-funded 'Independent Schools' and establishing annual student assessment and surveys to help monitor student learning and performance. Every Independent School must establish curriculum standards in Arabic, English, math, and science while complying with periodic financial requirements.

Education for a New Era reflects four critical principals that underlie the reform effort:

1. **Autonomy:** for schools and teachers in choosing their staff, teaching methods, and approaches in dealing with the needs of individual students and parents, all within a framework of international curriculum standards
2. **Accountability:** through a transparent assessment system that would hold all school leaders, teachers and parents responsible for the success of students
3. **Variety:** in schooling alternatives, encouraging schools to engage in different types of instructional programs
4. **Choice:** for parents in selecting schools that they think best suits their children

Supreme Education Council: Structure and Functions

The organization responsible for overseeing the goals of Qatar's education reform initiative is the Supreme Education Council (SEC). This body was developed by Emiri decree 37 in November 2002 (six months after the inauguration of the plan) and has been instrumental in the reform's development and implementation process. The members of the SEC were all chosen from Qatar's top leaders in government, business, and academia.

In addition to overseeing the progress of the reform effort, the SEC directs the work of three critical sub-bodies: the Education Institute (dealing with curriculum standards and teacher training), the Evaluation Institute, and the Higher Education Institute. The SEC is also working with the Ministry of Education to ensure the inclusion and establishment of new independent schools across the entire Qatari school system.

Qatar has also requested assistance from international sources of expertise such as the Rand-Qatar Policy Institute, as well as Australian and British institutions. It has also signed an agreement with a New Zealand-based education service provider to help mentor Qatari schools through a process of modernization and decentralization.¹³

The Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and his wife, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al-Misnad, were not satisfied with the higher education system in Qatar for their children. Instead of sending them abroad, however, they dreamed of creating world-class education close to home. They envisioned a university that would provide their children, as well as all Qataris, a full range of courses including information technology, Islamic Studies, business, medicine, and music. That vision turned into

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reality with the creation of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, deemed the most innovative education project ever seen in the Gulf.

The Foundation was established by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani in 1995 as a non-profit private organization aiming to support the development of quality human resources through centers of excellence in education, research, and technology. As noted by Sheikha Mozah, chairperson of the Foundation: "The sharing of knowledge, ideas and values is the noblest way to transcend barriers. In this sense, globalization is the architect, which constructs academic bridges across cultural and geographical landscapes."¹⁴ The Foundation defines its vision, philosophy, objectives, and mission as follows:¹⁵

- *Visions:* to develop and utilize human potential
- *Philosophy:* People are the most valuable asset of a nation
- *Objective:* To upgrade scientific and artistic capabilities and direct them towards the good of society
- *Mission:* to foster centers of excellence which develop people's abilities through investment in human capital, innovative technology, state of the art facilities, and partnerships with elite organizations thus raising the competency of people and the quality of life.

To achieve its objective of upgrading scientific and artistic capabilities for the good of society, and to accomplish its vision of developing "human potential," the Qatar Foundation has established a number of affiliated organs which are quasi-independent and linked through the Foundation in the fields of education, health, and community development. In addition, the Foundation's Education City campus, inaugurated in 2002, hosts leading U.S. colleges, educational organizations, and research centers. This integrated educational environment aims to encourage interaction between the existing educational and recreational facilities on-site, in addition to those envisaged within the new academic and medical areas of the University. Sheikha Mozah calls the Education City, "an engine of change for Qatar."¹⁶

Overall, Education City has formed a partnership with leading U.S. colleges, including Virginia Commonwealth University for arts degrees, Texas A&M University for engineering, Cornell's Weill Medical College, and Georgetown University, which joined in the fall of 2004. The American universities control admission standards, employ their own faculty, and determine the curriculum.

Despite the establishment of new transnational partnerships, development of Education City's 10 million square meter site is not due to be completed until 2008. While there is no accurate cost figure for the Foundation, some estimates put the project at over \$300 million. Moreover, the government has made it clear that it would allocate a significant portion of its GDP to research and development and specifically to Education City.

Other institutions at Education City include: Qatar Academy, a school devoted to the promotion of critical thinking; the Academic Bridge Program, which prepares secondary school graduates for enrollment in the Foundation's American universities; the Social Development Center, which mobilizes efforts in the service of society; and the Science and Technology Park, which aims to become the hub for technology

research and development. One of the most important institutions at Education City is the Rand-Qatar Policy Institute, which provides research, technical development, and training for analysts in the region. This in turn translates into policy decisions and implementation efforts related to education development.

Education City is constantly developing new areas of expertise, inviting excellent institutions, and creating an environment that is research driven. One of its ongoing projects, for example, is the Specialty Teaching Hospital, a modern medical center devoted to training medical students with the latest technology in medicine. Moreover, the Foundation intends to offer liberal arts courses, as well as graduate education. This futuristic Education City seeks to make Qatar the education center of the Middle East and one of the most developed and knowledge-based societies in the world.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar and their Structural Differences

Even though both Saudi Arabia and Qatar appear to follow the human capital theory that education leads to greater economic participation,

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they chose different paths-- or perhaps were led to different paths--in developing their education reform initiatives. While Qatar followed a sweeping reform targeting public schools, Saudi Arabia focused on "fixing" curriculum language, vocational and technical training, and internet-focused programs.

Overall, both countries initiated modern education systems about the same time, shared similar education policy objectives, and later exercised the political will to reform their education

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systems. Why, then, has Saudi Arabia not opted for a more comprehensive educational reform initiative comparable to that of Qatar's Education for a New Era? The answer lies in the structural differences—political, geographic, demographic, economic, and social—that exist between the two monarchies.

Generally speaking, Saudi Arabia and Qatar share many socio-economic and political attributes. They are both absolute monarchies; both

acquire their wealth from oil and gas revenues; both identify themselves as Muslim and Arab; and both are conservative societies. In addition, both countries historically aligned with the British against Ottoman control, and today both are important allies of the United States.

Structural and contextual differences, however, also make each country very distinct: First, Saudi Arabia holds a critical position among Arab and Muslim states as the guardian of the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina, two of the holiest cities of Islam. Thus, Saudi Arabia will continue to preserve its religious image and uphold the principles of Islam. Additionally, the Saudi regime has a deep relationship with the religious Wahhabi institution that feeds its legitimacy. Any hasty moves by the al-Sauds to disengage from the Wahhabi religious right would be tantamount to political suicide. And since the conservative religious establishment controls the whole Saudi educational system, from primary to university level, the government cannot simply undertake sweeping modernization efforts with regards to education reform. In order to avoid internal instability, the monarchy can only take careful moderate steps that would not threaten the conservative nature of its society.

Even though Qatar is also a Muslim country, it has no religious institutional attachments that dictate or influence its internal affairs. Therefore, Qatar, unlike Saudi Arabia, has more flexibility to introduce reform efforts such as the ambitious Education for a New Era and the Qatar Foundation. Importing U.S. universities, for example, has created little to no internal opposition in the country, despite having received some criticism from conservative groups in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to Wahhabi institutional control over the Saudi education system, the Saudi regime is currently facing internal instability. In support of Bin Laden's extremism, al-Qaeda factions have engaged in violent and deadly suicide bombings over the past two years, targeting Western compounds in protest of the government's friendly relations with the United States. This wave of aggression has led the Saudi government to take immediate measures to halt further terrorist attacks. While Qatar experienced a suicide bombing last year, instability in Saudi Arabia is much more pronounced. Following Qatar's footsteps with comprehensive reforms would only worsen internal tensions.

Saudi Arabia has become infamous as the home of 15 among the 19 hijackers in the September 11 attacks. As a result, the Saudi education system was subjected to worldwide scrutiny. Reports claimed that the religious curriculum, and in some extreme cases that Islam itself, preached hate, intolerance, and terrorism. Saudi officials such as the Education Minister denied such allegations: "If that was the case, all of the millions of Saudis who were educated in the system would be committing these acts."¹⁷ A review was ordered of all textbooks for evidence of extremism; five percent were deemed questionable by authorities and discarded. For example, some textbooks replaced the term *jihad*, a term defined by many as holy war, with *tadhiya*, a less incendiary word meaning sacrifice.

This reformed curriculum would not have taken place were it not for the external pressures facing the Saudi-Wahhabi education system.

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However, many Saudi officials have blamed outsiders for unfairly criticizing the focus on religion in the education system. In comparison, Qatar has not faced the same external scrutiny and therefore has been able to successfully craft its ENE program around modern reforms and initiatives. While Qatar was supported internationally for giving autonomy to independent schools, Saudi

Arabia would probably be watched carefully if it chose to do the same.

Social factors also contribute to the divergence of the two countries' education systems. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are conservative societies. But while Saudi Arabia has maintained conservative beliefs regarding women, Qatar has encouraged women to participate in the political, economic, and educational spheres. As mentioned above, Qatar not only opened the door for women to vote, but it has also permitted women to run for Council positions and hold ministerial posts. Today, a woman serves as Qatar's

Minister of Education. Additionally, out of the SEC's seven board members, three are very educated and influential Qatari women. The Emir's consort, Sheikha Mozah, has also built a distinguished image for herself through her efforts in Education City, while becoming the face of education reform efforts across the Arab World.

Although women in Saudi Arabia remain prohibited from holding ministerial positions, a woman has been appointed as dean of Qatar's Arab Open University. Nevertheless, there are still many conservative aspects inherent in Saudi Arabia's religious society where men and women are not permitted to interact in work areas, permitting skeptics to question whether Saudi Arabia is ready for a legitimate modernization in education reform.

Another difference between the two countries is population size. Saudi Arabia has approximately 24 million more inhabitants than Qatar. Moreover, the GDP per capita in Qatar is much higher than that of Saudi Arabia. Thus, Qatar has an economic advantage over Saudi Arabia, which places it in a better position to undertake comprehensive reform initiatives at the national level. In other words,

Qatar can afford to use a big part of its government expenditure on education reform, while at the same time maintaining its other larger reform efforts.

Country size is also an important characteristic to note when understanding either Qatar or Saudi Arabia's capability to adopt educational reforms. Qatar, for example, is approximately equal to two large cities in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, while Qatar's main city and capital is Doha, Saudi Arabia has 13 regions and at least five major cities. In devising a broad reform initiative, Saudi Arabia has to take into consideration that it would have to spend extensive amounts of capital, provide more teacher training and textbooks, and build more schools. In addition, a national educational reform initiative in Saudi Arabia would have to assume that not all its public schools are at the same stage of development. Therefore, a comprehensive plan would have to follow pilot programs.

Conclusion

The Saudi government has undoubtedly begun to implement modern educational reforms in the last few decades. The oil boom, for example, created a welfare society and transformed the nomadic nature of Saudi Arabia into an industrialized nation. Its education system, however, is not developing at a pace fast enough to adapt to the rapid changes currently taking place in the competitive global economy.

While Saudi Arabia cannot mirror Qatar's Education for a New Era, Saudi education reform initiatives can and should follow Qatar's educational initiatives, vision, and progress. In undertaking reform, Saudi Arabia can only follow a gradual approach that reflects the needs of its society. At the same time, an educational system should keep up with the demands of globalization and the examples of more developed nations in their approach to education and knowledge-based societies.

In the end, these will not be quick endeavors, and it will be necessary for governments and decision makers to think long-term. The rate of return for investing in human capital development is long and drawn out. However, principles such as those embodied within Education for a New Era - autonomy, accountability, variety and choice - could prove instrumental to Saudi Arabia, with its large geographic and socio-ethnic scope. Also, decentralization efforts, including transferring control from the national ministerial level to the school level, are important to give schools the chance to manage themselves and exercise autonomy while simultaneously introducing new

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levels of administrative efficiency and academic superiority.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

¹ Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books (1999). 38-40.

² Arab Human Development Report: *Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*. UNDP, 2002, 6

³ Arab Human Development Report: *Building a Knowledge Society*. UNDP, 2003, 54

⁴ Saudi Ministry of Education website: <http://www.moe.gov.sa/openshare/moe/index.htm> (accessed April 14, 2005)

⁵ Ministry of Education website: <http://www.moe.edu.qa/Arabic/index.shtml> (accessed April 8, 2005)

⁶ "Educational Reform not under Foreign Pressure, Says Naif." Arab News, January 22, 2004.

⁷ Political and Economic Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2004).

⁸ Ibid, 6

⁹ The AOU has branches in Jordan, Bahrain, Lebanon and Egypt.

¹⁰ AME Info: <http://www.ameinfo.com/45893.html> (accessed April 14, 2005)

¹¹ SEC website: <http://www.english.education.gov.qa/>

¹² Dr. Sheikha: "Education Reform Critical to Qatar's Development," see SEC website

¹³ Qatar Widens NZ to Help Modernize System. See SEC website.

¹⁴ Qatar Foundation website <http://www.qf.edu.qa/rs.htm> (accessed April 13, 2005)

¹⁵ Qatar Foundation website <http://www.qf.edu.qa/rs.htm> (accessed April 13, 2005)

¹⁶ The Pearl Newsletter at <http://www.qatarebassy.net/news/QatarNews6.pdf> 19

¹⁷ "Qatar Reshapes its Schools, Putting English over Islam: Conservatives See Reform as Extension of US Influence in Gulf." Washington Post Foreign Service. February 2, 2003, p A20. Online at Supreme Education Council website.