

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

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Deborah Amos covers the Middle East for NPR News. Amos constantly travels throughout the Middle East covering a range of stories including developments in the Gulf, Syria's refugee crisis and the rise of well-educated Syrian youth who are unqualified for jobs in a market-driven economy, a series focusing on the emerging power of Turkey, and the plight of Iraqi refugees. In 2003, Amos returned to NPR after a decade in television news, including *ABC's Nightline* and *World News Tonight* and the PBS programs *NOW with Bill Moyers* and *Frontline*. A Nieman Fellow at Harvard University from 1991-1992, Amos was returned to Harvard in 2010 as a Shorenstein Fellow at the Kennedy School. Amos is the author of *Eclipse of the Sunnis: Power, Exile, and Upheaval in the Middle East* (Public Affairs, 2010) and *Lines in the Sand: Desert Storm and the Remaking of the Arab World* (Simon and Schuster, 1992). ■

After the Age of Plenty: Signs of Austerity in the GCC

The evolving relationship between Saudi Arabia's massive youth population and its government will shape the country's future in an age of austerity, according to Deborah Amos. While changing economic, demographic, and political realities call for farsighted solutions, the Saudi leadership is only beginning to translate ambitious reform-minded messaging into a strategy that clearly defines roles and expectations in a changing status quo. Amos, a renowned Middle East correspondent for National Public Radio (NPR), spoke at a CSIS Middle East Program Gulf Roundtable on April 25, 2016 entitled "After the Age of Plenty: Signs of Austerity in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)."

The impacts of Saudi Arabia's ongoing and dramatic demographic shifts should not be underestimated, Amos argued. The country has seen its population balloon from 3.9 million in 1950 to nearly 30 million in 2015, and the population is expected to increase further by 45 percent by 2050. Unlike other Gulf states which are aging out of their demographic "youth bulges," Saudi Arabia has yet to see the far end of what some call its "youth tsunami." Nearly 20 percent of Saudis are between the ages of 15 and 24, and another 27 percent are aged 14 or younger. The current generation of youth, most of whom were born after the first Gulf War, are coming of age at a time of radical economic shifts and more incremental social shifts. As the full implications of these changes remain unclear, young Saudis face a host of unanswered questions.

Saudi Arabia's economic outlook raises questions about the state's ability to maintain the existing social contract with increasingly finite resources. Compared to other GCC state like Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia faced high rates of poverty and unemployment even before the dramatic decline in oil prices. A large number of college graduates struggle to find employment after graduation. The leadership's "Vision 2030" strategy pledges to revitalize Saudi's economic growth independent of oil, but reforms to highly popular rentier policies are likely to exacerbate grievances in the short term. Subsidy cuts and slashes to social spending frustrate expectations created

THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the strategic importance of Gulf energy, changing Gulf relations with Asia, human capital development, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. The Gulf Roundtable series is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. ■

by decades of government assurances to Saudi citizens that state support to defuse the costs of supporting large families was ensured.

Some Saudis are also pushing for social change, but any shifts are likely to be incremental. Amos described a wide array of individuals and organizations owned and operated by young Saudis that challenge existing norms that restrict public discourse or women's participation in public life. Some groups aim to use elections or representation in local councils to promote women's political participation and representation. Others focus on boosting women's presence in the labor force through training and recruitment programs.

The government continues to demonstrate a degree of ambivalence towards such pushes for women's participation. The "Vision 2030" plan lists boosting female employment as one of its goals, and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman bin has indicated his lack of objection to lifting the extant ban on women driving. However, policies remain which make participation in the workforce or in public life difficult for most Saudi women, and a practical impossibility for many. The fate of such policies under the as-yet unspecified implementation mechanisms for "Vision 2030" or in the event of Muhammad bin Salman's accession to the throne remain open questions. Meanwhile, opposition from conservative actors with entrenched political clout and prevailing societal attitudes are likely to help cap the ceiling of what social reform efforts can achieve in the near term.

Elements of Saudi Arabia's leadership, most importantly Muhammad bin Salman, have responded to mounting economic pressures and an evolving regional environment with calls for proactive and bold adaptation. Amos suggested that bin Salman has been elevated to a position of influence and high visibility in part because of a perception that he is well-positioned to connect to the rising generation. Bin Salman's rhetoric and media overtures help set a tone of dynamism and openness to change that some Saudi leaders hope will appeal to youth. In many cases, the optics of bin Salman's media engagements are as much a part of the message as the content of his policy proposals. The prince's appearance with a Western female journalist in one interview, and in relatively informal dress in a casual setting in another, both signal a departure from past emphasis on ceremony and adherence to an ultraconservative image.

Until recently, Amos noted, this message has been directed at globalized elites, and it has been articulated in visionary

rather than operational terms. The skirting of domestic media in the announcement and justification of plans to transform Saudi Arabia has raised ire within the country. The unveiling of the Kingdom's "Vision 2030" plan in a lengthy televised interview in Arabic with Saudi outlet *Al-Arabiya* may mark a pivot towards an increased focus on Saudi and Arab media to communicate directly to the Saudi public.

Ultimately, the impact of government rhetoric about post-oil reforms will hinge on the policy changes that accompany it, Amos argued. Efforts to raise the competitiveness of the Saudi education system, which struggles to keep up with the country's needs, would be a sign of significant reform. Despite the high number of Western-educated Saudis, domestic universities struggle to produce graduates equipped with the skills necessary to solve problems crucial to spurring the economy. While senior members of the royal family have made efforts to project a more youth-oriented outlook, Amos suggested that Saudi leaders have yet to accompany a fundamental shift in messaging with meaningful shifts in leadership.

The challenge before Riyadh is not only to elucidate coherent, comprehensive roadmaps to implement still-notional plans of transformations. The government must also offer Saudi citizens, and particularly the youth population, a clear understanding of their place in the new order. Much will depend on how the government answers questions of national identity, belonging, and mutual expectations for state-citizen relations in a period of rapid change. ■

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