

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Dr. Edit Schlaffer is a social scientist and activist who founded the Vienna-based non-governmental organization, Women Without Borders, in 2002. Her research has focused on advocacy for women as agents of political and societal change, and her numerous publications have earned significant critical acclaim. In 2008, she launched Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), the first women's anti-terror platform. Her current work focuses on youth activism and gender equality in the Middle East.

Dr. Ulrich Kropiunigg is an associate professor of psychology at the Medical University of Vienna. He has conducted extensive research on medical psychology and psychotherapy. His recent work has largely focused on cultural psychology in the Arab World. ■

Youth in Revolt?

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been spared the unrest that recently swept many of its neighbors in the Middle East. Although many perceive a high degree of stability, the country faces many of the same socioeconomic ills that helped spark uprisings elsewhere: a massive youth bulge, high unemployment, an education gap, and gender inequality. Dr. Edit Schlaffer, of Women without Borders and Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), and Dr. Ulrich Kropiunigg, of the Medical University of Vienna, argued that young Saudis have largely ignored calls for public protests, but with over 60 percent of the population under the age of 30, shifting attitudes among youth will help determine Saudi Arabia's course over the next decade and beyond. They delivered their remarks at a Gulf Roundtable held at CSIS on November 4, 2011.

Their remarks were informed by a series of surveys that Women without Borders conducted with university students throughout the Kingdom. The surveys explored young adult attitudes toward a wide range of social issues, including changing relationships between tradition, religion, family, and gender. The findings help shed light on the attitudes of young Saudis and underscore the interconnections between these issues that will demand creative thinking on the part of the Saudi government in the years ahead.

Schlaffer explained that Women Without Borders conducted these surveys with university students in Saudi Arabia because change in the Kingdom will likely come from this segment of society. According to Schlaffer, Saudi Arabia is still a rich society, and any political changes will not come about through bread revolutions.

Kropiunigg maintained that the surveys were unique because they sought to correct prejudices that often color Western perceptions of the Arab world. By circumventing "Orientalist" approaches and delving into personal issues, they hoped to gain valuable information that can be useful to Saudi officials.

Kropiunigg explained that the project gathered data from male and female students in Riyadh, al-Qasim, Dammam, and Jeddah. Such a sampling hoped to guarantee the broadest geographic reach. Their study found that young Saudis seek to emulate Western cultural practices, but they find few outlets in their intensely religious soci-

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 role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of Gulf energy, 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. ■

ety. The study also found that young people are highly engaged in discussions about gender roles. At the same time, both men and women do not wish to see women engage in politics. Instead, they are optimistic about the leadership's gradual commitment to reform.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia recently announced important gender reforms, but while he granted women the right to vote and participate in elections, Schlaffer believes it was beneficial to women that the reforms would be introduced in no sooner than 2015. She argued that it is best for Saudi leadership to prepare for women's participation and invest in women and their leadership skills. That way, meaningful female political participation can actually materialize.

For Saudi women, there is reluctance to do things that could harm their reputation or cause them to be seen as undesirable spouses. She suggested that one way around this is for Saudi women to argue that they are emulating Moroccan or Libyan women pressing for more rights. Thus, reformism might avoid being stigmatized as inherently "Western."

The current political apathy, they argued, is a result of a lack of individualization. Two-thirds of respondents said they had little time and space for activities beyond school work. Due to limits on self-expression, over ninety percent of the respondents said they believed that teachers should allow them to form their own opinions. However, many teachers base lessons only on the Quran and Sunnah and do not allow discussion of "deviant issues" like social affairs.

While overall trends were evident, Schlaffer and Kropiunigg discovered a large amount of regionalism in the survey data. Jeddah, for instance, is a relatively open society, but the data from Jedda youth still provided a mixed picture. However, al-Qasim is an intensely traditional place, and a majority of women there had never interacted with Western women. Nonetheless, women from al-Qasim were highly interested in the research that they were conducting.

Schlaffer presented ideas on how to move Saudi society forward. She maintained that while youth are highly educated, the Saudi educational system does not equip young Saudis with the skills necessary to compete in today's modern economy. School systems around the world encourage critical thinking, risk taking, and creativity, while Saudi education values conformity. Over eighty percent of university graduates are employed in the public sector, and such a status quo is unsustainable.

In light of the tenuous situation in Egypt, Schlaffer indicated that the key issue is not whether something similarly

dramatic will happen in Saudi Arabia. Instead, the pressing issue will be how events throughout the region will affect Saudi Arabia. If Egypt turns in a self-destructive direction and the Yemeni situation continues to deteriorate, there may be little inspiration for Saudis to demand change.

One complication preventing reform is a high level of satisfaction among Saudi youth, a low interest in political participation, and yet a personal sense of distress. Policy responses to this kind of environment are difficult. Therefore, Schlaffer suggests that any change in Saudi Arabia is likely to come from within and span many years. Saudi youth possess very inquisitive but untouched minds, and only through continued interaction with other societies and internal debate can their skills be built up. The youth surveyed represent the first generation in the Kingdom whose complete education has been indigenous, they said, and Saudis will have to grapple with concepts that Western societies have had generations to debate.

Nevertheless, Saudis understand the need for change. Despite traditional xenophobic attitudes, Saudi officials host foreigners, and Saudi leaders are willing to foster dialogue abroad in hopes that these conversations filter back into the Kingdom. The pressing need for a second income to facilitate a middle class lifestyle could even accelerate gender reforms. In many ways, the survey results may look gloomy to outsiders because of the long time horizons, but Schlaffer and Kropiunigg are optimistic because they believe their survey established a dialogue with a group of people clearly seeking improvement. ■

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