MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

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SEX AND THE CITY (RIYADH)

Saudi Arabians are flocking to neighboring Bahrain to purchase copies of *The Girls of Riyadh.* Written by a 24 year-old Saudi woman, Rajaa Al-Sanie, the book tells the lives and tribulations of four affluent young women living in Riyadh, as conveyed through a series of emails. Al-Sanie joins a cohort of female authors from the region, such as Marjane Satrapi of Iran, who have gained a reputation for intelligent, funny and biting social commentary.

The book presents a complicated picture of male-female relationships in Saudi Arabia. Men and women are constrained by strict social pressures, yet the novel is full of tales of drunkenness, male and female homosexuality, cross-dressing, and extramarital affairs. While only one of the women has a happily-ever-after ending, the other women are far from passive victims. The women's stories are open ended, and the women themselves are enterprising their use of available resources: other women, their families, the Internet, and their vicious senses of humor.

Despite not yet having been published in Saudi Arabia, the book has instigated much debate and discussion. Some call the book an insult. Others complain that it offers insight only into the lives of rich and pampered Saudi youth, who face the same trivial problems as their peers all over the world. Still others, such as Ghazi al-Qusaibi, the Saudi Minister of Labor who wrote the book's introduction, welcome the opportunity for frank dialogue about Saudi society.■ ***-RAS***

LIBYA'S GENERATION GAP

By Jon B. Alterman

Libya is in a race. After a quarter century as a *bête noire* of international politics, fount of unpredictable proclamations, and supporter of innumerable liberation movements, Libyan policy has taken a decided turn toward engagement with the rest of the world.

While Libya's reorientation of its policy is well understood, the urgency of its challenge is not. Indeed, many in the West take a long view of Libya, suggesting that it will be five years or more until they can judge Libyan intentions.

There is work that must be done in Libya now, however. A quarter century of isolation from the rest of the world has meant that an entire generation of Libyans has grown up cut off from international training, and from international exposure. More pointedly, the last generation of Libyans to spend extensive time overseas—the generation that obtained foreign graduate degrees in the 1970s—is on the verge of retirement. The push is on now to train a new generation to take their place before they all leave the scene.

Building human capital is a slow and uncertain process, but Libya has little time for slowness or uncertainty. Opening up to the world puts a huge premium on people who can bridge between cultures, interpret inscrutable gestures, and speak multiple languages. Not only does Libya have precious few such people, but the world lacks people who understand Libya as well. The state has given young Libyans a healthy dose of both doctrine and paternalism, and they have accepted the former in order to benefit from the latter. The environment has prepared few for entrepreneurship or risk-taking, two characteristics that are among the most important engines behind thriving modern societies.

Perhaps most damagingly, Libya's isolation has meant that the connection between personal excellence and success has often been severed, with loyalty and lineage proving a better guarantor of good outcomes than performance. Building a meritocratic system

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CAPTURING IRAQ: CONVEYING COMPLEXITIES TO FOREIGN AUDIENCES

On February 22, the CSIS Middle East program and the International Center for Journalists hosted three journalists covering Iraq. The journalists, Ali Ahmed, of *al-Iraqiyya*, Quil Lawrence of the *The World*, and Naseer Nouri of *The Washington Post* spoke to a CSIS audience about the challenges of covering the continuing conflict in Iraq for foreign audiences. They spoke about the difficulties of moving freely in Iraq, of maintaining Iraqi contacts outside the Green Zone, and of making stories relevant to American and European audiences on a daily basis. They also offered their impressions from what they had seen on the ground, including their thoughts on the possibility of increased sectarian violence. This was an off-the-record meeting.■

from the ground up is a daunting task, but an urgent and necessary one.

What Libya is facing in this regard is not unique. Most Arab countries of the Gulf went through similar transformations in the last half-century as they opened up to the world, and they have emerged intact. Some, such as the United Arab Emirates, have put a huge premium on education and training of young people, with strong results.

Where Libya is different, however, is that Arab media make abundantly clear to Libyans how much more advanced many oil-rich countries in the Arab world have grown in the last quarter-century, and how much distance Libya has to go.

Not only have satellite dishes become ubiquitous in Libya—much as they have become in other countries—but they have come to occupy a central role in the life of the society. In a country with few social outlets such as cafés, theaters, restaurants or cinemas, free-to-air satellite television dominates leisure time. Entertainment programming such as music videos and game shows help knit Libyans together with the rest of the Arab world, helping build a genuinely common culture on the popular level. With virtually no domestic or regional news available in local Libyan newspapers, al-Jazeera's news programming provides a prism through which Libyans see the Arab world and their place in it.

Just as important as the words that are transmitted are the images: prosperous young Arabs speaking their minds, surrounded by skyscrapers and plentiful consumer goods. It is an attractive reality that stands in stark contrast to the products of orchestrated state planning.

Young Libyans, then, are not wholly ignorant of the rest of the world, but they are inexperienced in it. There is much they find attractive, and much they find intimidating. Talk of social and economic change is in the air, but the direction of change, and more importantly its results on everyday life, remain frustratingly vague.

There are few signs that young Libyans are rebellious. Graffiti is rare in Libya, as are the sorts of atypical dress that often signify youth rebellion. Libya's youthful population does not seem to be seething. Still, the challenges Libya faces are as urgent as they are stark. Less than three years after the United Nations lifted sanctions on Libya, the clock is ticking on training a new generation to replace the one that is retiring. At the same time, young people in Libya look to the rest of the Arab world and see a place that appears more prosperous and often more free. The Libyan government is clearly seeking to open up, recently announcing a major scheme to open the country to international media—under the patronage of Seif al-Islam Ghadhafi, the son of the country's leader.

Modernization is a process rather than a destination, and there is much in this process that remains uncertain. What is more certain is Libya's need to engage in the processes of reconnecting to the world. It must do so thoroughly, but it must also do so quickly.■02/24/06

Links of Interest

Rajaa al-Sanie, author of *The Girls of Riydadh*, maintains a personal website with a summary of her book in English:
http://www.rajaa.net/v2/index.htm

The Middle East Program held the fourth session of its Maghreb Roundtable on February 16. The Maghreb Roundtable's homepage includes summaries of past events:
http://www.csis.org/mideast/maghreb

Program Director Jon B. Alterman's analysis following Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections:
http://www.csis.org/mideast/hamas

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