

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

## The Education Imperative

by Jon B. Alterman

Education is a two-way street. Governments invest in education because it contributes to national strength, and individuals invest in education because it contributes to individual strength. While the precise balance differs, one side principally provides resources, the other principally provides time, and each derives benefit.

At the core of this bargain is governmental interest in boosting productivity and an individual concern with economic security. We conventionally think of education as being about hope and promise, but underlying education is a fear that ignorance and illiteracy create burdens on governments and individuals alike.

In some of the wealthier states in the Arab world, the fear is absent, and the results are apparent. In these states, national wealth comes from natural resources rather than large numbers of people, and individuals' prosperity often comes from loyalty rather than productivity. Indeed, it can be hard to measure productivity at all. Employment for citizens is overwhelmingly in the public sector, where outputs are in services that are difficult to value.

With a different set of economic expectations, there is a different set of educational expectations as well, and all of these expectations are wrapped into a political bargain in which governments and their citizens exchange physical security for political loyalty.

Of these—education, economics and politics—education seems least urgent in a world that demands short-term results. Street protests are occurring now, elections are happening now, and money is needed now. For many, the last demand is key. One conventional explanation for recent political upheavals in the Arab world is that they stem from material deprivation, and wealthier governments have tried to respond through increased wages and better public facilities.

Yet, if education does not become a central part of the solution set, it threatens to undermine the others. In many places, public education is something to be

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## Tweeting Orthodoxy

Savvy technologists are not all liberal hipsters. For example, some of Saudi Arabia's most popular conservative preachers are heavy users of Twitter. They do not use the service to spew invective or xenophobia. Instead, their content is largely devoted to mindfulness of God, an Islamic concept called *taqwa*. Tweeters like Aidh al-Qarni—one of several Saudi clerics with over 1 million Twitter followers—fulfill this function by gently reinforcing traditional Muslim values and practices with messages of personal encouragement—often dozens of times per day. The message is not radicalism, but orthodoxy.

Al-Qarni has occasionally taken divisive positions, as when he argued in 2004 that Islam does not prohibit women from driving. Yet, it seems to be the non-controversial quality of his and other preachers' posts that give them such broad appeal. There is little invective here. Followers are far more likely to find specific instructions on performing ablutions or weekly reminders to attend Friday prayers, alongside personal congratulations and announcements that promote new material on one of his many other electronic platforms.

Al-Qarni has company in becoming the master of all media. Beyond Twitter, he and other Saudi clerics regularly post sermons on YouTube, maintain Web sites bearing their own names, and link to both these sites on Facebook, where visitors comment on individual posts by the hundreds. The comments demonstrate that there is a huge audience that is both familiar with modern social media and attracted to the traditional Islamic message by which it is delivered. ■ GC

## CSIS Hosts Dr. Anwar Gargash

On May 17, 2012, CSIS hosted Dr. Anwar Gargash, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates, for a private discussion about Gulf regional security and the U.S.-UAE bilateral relationship. Dr. Gargash discussed U.S.-UAE partnership, especially on difficult issues like Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia. He gave his perspective on the ongoing political change in the UAE and in the Middle East more broadly, emphasizing the importance of taking a long view. He discussed the future of efforts at GCC unity and the challenges of dealing with the Syrian situation. Dr. Gargash concluded his remarks by discussing the current situation with Iran. ■

endured rather than embraced, and the educational system has trouble producing even small numbers of individuals with world-class creativity, intellectual rigor or work habits. A more educated populace gives resilience to states and diminishes populations' reliance on their governments. A more educated populace creates more agile nations, able to deal more deftly with a changing world.

In the Arab world, a more educated populace would be able to prepare states and peoples for a world in which the ruling bargain will have to be renegotiated. Government largesse has been rising at double-digit rates, and populations are growing swiftly. Even if oil prices were to steadily increase, the demands would outstrip governments' ability to meet them. If oil prices fluctuate, as they have done historically, the ruling bargain will come up against some hard realities.

Education reform in the region is underway. Governments have invested billions in foreign scholarships, in rethinking pedagogy, and in building institutions of higher learning to engage future generations.

Yet changing education without changing the nature of employment that comes after it will not suffice. For many Arabs, education is inversely correlated to employment chances. That is to say, it is easier to find a job as a manual laborer than as an accountant or an architect (let alone as an historian), and millions of young Arabs spend years looking for work between the time they finish their education and when they get their first job.

Further, that first job is rarely one that capitalizes on the enthusiasm and taste for experimentation that many young people have. Instead, many yearn for the predictability and security of government employment. The phenomenon holds true both in rich states, whose elaborate safety net reaches into the private sector, as well as in poor states, where government employment carries with it the necessity to find second and third jobs to make ends meet. What is common in all of these environments is a sense that individual effort and ability are poor determinants of success, and that loyalty is more important than effectiveness.

All the educational reform in the world cannot work if it is not connected to better opportunities at the end of education. To incentivize perseverance and student achievement, there must be rewards for excellence and consequences for mediocrity. Doing so will be hard. On the one hand, there is a rising sense of entitlement, as entry-level office jobs sometimes draw \$60,000 annual salaries. On the other hand, serious adjustments to the labor market are brutally complicated. They are intimately tied to differentiated wage structures for nationals and foreigners, managing expatriate labor forces, and allowing for profitability among private sector employers. The transition will be difficult, but it will surely be less so if done at a time of relative prosperity, such as prevails now.

The other piece of the education equation is ensuring that education meets the needs of the workforce. Job creation cannot be effective without a supply of workers who can do jobs effectively and efficiently. Building this cohort will mean reshaping education at all levels, not simply in universities. The primary and secondary levels in particular are where critical thinking and solid work habits need to begin. Universities are an immediate pipeline into the job economy, but they should not be a first resort for teaching skills that have lifelong consequence.

Amidst discussions about the short-term challenges for wealthy countries wrought by change in the Levant, the foregoing suggests that the challenge for many of the wealthier countries in the Middle East is a longer-term one that events elsewhere in the region exacerbate but do not drive. It also suggests that strategies to confront these challenges will have to be holistic, integrating a wide range of citizens' interactions with their governments. Finally, it suggests that these efforts will ultimately go to the core of how states work, how the rulers interact with the ruled, and how consent is both won and kept. The stakes could not be higher. ■ 5/18/2012

## Links of Interest

Jon Alterman published an online opinion piece for CNN entitled "[Israeli politics in tailspin over Iran.](#)"

NPR quoted Jon Alterman in "[Biden Foreign-Policy Counterattack on Romney Highlights GOP Challenge.](#)"

*Bloomberg Businessweek* quoted Jon Alterman in "[UN Observers on Mission-to-Fail in Syria Lag on Staffing.](#)"

CBS News quoted Jon Alterman in "[Fresh attacks target symbols of Syrian state power.](#)"

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