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Qatar Reshapes Its Schools, Putting English Over Islam

Conservatives See Reform as Extension of U.S. Influence in Gulf

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DOHA, Qatar -- Students are learning less Islam and more English in the tiny desert sheikdom of Qatar. Prestigious American universities, such as Cornell with its medical school and Carnegie Mellon with its business school, are being lured to set up branch campuses. Last week, the country's ruler announced an even more sweeping reform for public schools, an overhaul developed by the Rand Corp.

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"We are having a revolution in education," said Fatima Imadi, a U.S.-educated researcher helping remake Qatar's English program.

"The reform in this country is something you won't see anywhere else in the Middle East," said Darwish Emadi, who last week left his post as dean of Qatar University's graduate school to supervise the public school reforms. "It's a total earthquake."

For now, Qatar's education experiment is the only one of its kind in the Arab world, one of many modernizations introduced by the ruler, Sheik Hamad Bin Khalifa Thani. But Emadi hopes the reforms will turn Qatar into "a model state" for the Persian Gulf of the future, a glimpse of the liberalization that some Bush administration officials say would emerge if President Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq was destroyed.

That vision is the worst nightmare of many conservative Muslim leaders in the region: Americans not only occupying military bases, but also influencing classrooms in the homeland of Islam. Ever since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks against the United States, such leaders have warned of a U.S.-led campaign to rewrite textbooks, change time-honored teaching methods and cut back on the amount of religion in the curriculum.

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Sept. 11 hijackers, leaders of the conservative Islamic kingdom ordered a review of all textbooks for evidence of extremism after the attacks and found that 5 percent of the material should be purged. But broader reforms have not been carried out and many Saudi officials have blamed outsiders for unfairly tarring their religion-focused education system.

"People are saying that the education system is the reason for taking a violent stand toward other countries and religions, but that's not true," Saudi Education Minister Mohammed Rasheed said recently. "If that was the case, all of the millions of Saudis who were educated in the system would be committing these acts."

Still, many government officials and intellectuals in the Middle East have come to view the fallout from Sept. 11 as a chance to push through education reform, changes that would not only promote religious tolerance but also seek to introduce notions of greater citizen participation, individual choice and entrepreneurship. Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Abdullah, earlier this month seemed to endorse the idea of broader change, issuing a

In a region where holy war is explained in public-school textbooks -- "Consider the infidel your enemy," advises a Saudi text for 10th-graders -- the connection between political Islam of the sort advocated by Osama bin Laden and the education offered to Persian Gulf schoolchildren has been the subject of agonizing dispute.

In some places, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the education debate has focused on how -- or whether -- the religious curriculum promotes intolerance and extremism. But Qatar has chosen a dramatic course, deciding not just to rewrite textbooks but also aiming to prepare its citizens for a more participatory and economically competitive future. The reforms are the personal campaign of the wealthy emirate's change-oriented ruler, who has reshaped his land into a key U.S. ally and imposed an array of reforms since he nudged his father aside and took over in 1995.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, the role of the United States in promoting such change has at times overshadowed the post-Sept. 11 education debate. "American occupation," complained a Jordanian writer last week of a State Department initiative to promote education and other reforms. "American interference," declared a Kuwaiti religious leader, Abdul Razak Shuyji, referring to curriculum-reform efforts.

"A curriculum should present our own identity, our own history, our own religion," Shuyji declared. "It's not for others to come and try to change it."

In Saudi Arabia, home of 15 of the 19

manifesto calling for a more progressive Arab world with citizens better educated to compete in the modern economy.

"September 11th crystallized our thoughts," said Mohammad Salem Sabah, Kuwait's minister of state for foreign affairs. "It's a necessity-driven agenda."

Sabah listed three things that he thinks are hindering development in the Arab world -- rising unemployment in a region accustomed to coasting on oil revenue, ineffective and old-fashioned teaching methods, and failure to adapt to the Internet age in the schools.

"We in the Gulf countries have debated among ourselves some of the shortcomings in our developmental path and we recognized we need to reform our system," he said. "First of all, in education. Not because the United States asked us, but because we generally don't provide people with the skills" demanded by the marketplace.

But Kuwait's own experience suggests how difficult that will be. Last fall, soon after gunmen allegedly professing militant Islamic beliefs opened fire on two U.S. Marines here, killing one, Kuwait's Education Ministry declared war on "violence and fanaticism," ordering a study of and changes in textbooks that officials feared might promote extremism as part of the religious curriculum.

Kuwaiti education officials took issue in particular with religion textbooks describing jihad as mandatory war on non-Muslims and Israel as the religious enemy of all Muslims. Instead, textbooks should promote "brotherhood, equality, love, caring, mercifulness and coexistence," according to the decree issued in November.

The study is still underway, and not a word has been changed. But many thousands of words have been exchanged in a debate that has touched on everything from the fear of the United States' long hand in Kuwaiti affairs to the nature of politics in a state governed by the Sabah family with hereditary power. The textbook issue has been front-page news for weeks in Kuwait, with Islamic leaders holding protest rallies and delivering parliamentary speeches against change.

"What is necessary is not to change the textbook. It is not written in our textbook that Americans are enemies," said Mubarak Dawailah, an Islamic parliamentary leader who has led the campaign against textbook reform. "You have to change the mentality, not the textbook."

In his view, jihad and the Israelis are explained correctly already. "We should not change what we say about jihad. It is against *kafir*," the unbeliever. Same with the question of Israel. "Our textbook says Israelis are enemies because they want to take over Palestinian lands," he said. "This is correct."

For Dawailah and other Islamic politicians in Kuwait, the education debate is not just about what children should be taught, but about U.S. influence in this part of the world. "Muslims do not accept that somebody can come from outside and change his concepts," he said. "When the regime in any Muslim country says we are going to change the concept of jihad, all the people understand this is because of pressure of the Americans."

But those who favor reforms say the Islamic conservatives have seized on the matter of the textbooks as a political issue, hoping to deflect attention from their own connections to radical groups.

"This is one of the games they are playing. They are trying to raise the banner of Islam, to create an issue where there is none," said Abdullah Nibari, a reformist leader in the Kuwaiti parliament. "The way of teaching is what's being reformed, not departing from the principles of Islam. We have to make sure Islam is not interpreted in a fashion which leads to extremism."

Here in Qatar, education reform had been on the agenda since well before Sept. 11. But it was not until a month after the 2001 attacks that the most dramatic part of the overhaul got

underway, when a team of experts arrived from Rand's California headquarters. The mission was clear: review the entire primary and secondary school system with an eye toward massive change.

"These changes are consistent with the emir's vision of the country," said Dominic Brewer, director of Rand's education unit and lead consultant on the Qatar project. "Changes like more openness in the economy, entrepreneurship and ultimately democracy require a population that's used to these things. This was the opportunity to really build a model school system, to combine the best elements from around the world."

Brewer said his team had encountered a "very rigid, very bureaucratic" system, with not enough emphasis on science, English and the Internet and too much stress on memorization and teacher control. They recommended an entirely new system, based on parent choice, that would eliminate the centralized model prevalent in most Arab countries and bypass the tradition-bound Education Ministry.

Last week, the emir took formal steps to adopt the Rand plan, appointing a supreme council on education headed by the crown prince to oversee the reform, and two new independent agencies to carry it out. Rand will remain on board to supervise the implementation.

Even before the system-wide overhaul, educators here have implemented more modest reforms, such as elected student councils in all schools. Last year, English instruction became mandatory from first grade on. And to make way for more hours of English, classes in Islamic studies and Arabic were cut back, said Nawal Alshaikh, director of the curriculum and textbook department in the Education Ministry.

Qatari children now have four classes in Islam a week, she said. Two years ago, it was six. Whereas Saudi Arabia has five or six required religion textbooks, Qatar now has just one.

Such reforms have aroused debate around the Persian Gulf, where they have been widely criticized as U.S.-imposed. A leading Saudi newspaper, al Watan, wrote about the Qatar program as having originated with the "Jewish foundation," as it described Rand.

"How can the Americans know what is right for Qatari schoolchildren?" asked a professor at Kuwait University, who asked not to be named. "Reform is something that must come from within, it cannot be bought."

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