# Saudi Arabia: the politics of education

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In the aftermath of 11 September Saudi Arabia's religious education system became the target of widespread criticism. The system and its underlying ideology have been accused of contributing to anti-western sentiments and of providing fertile ground for Islamic extremism.[1] Many Saudis, while recognizing the economic and demographic need for educational reform, have responded by defending their school system, and Saudi officials adamantly reject any link between their curriculum and extremism. The Saudi minister of education, for instance, declared that any claim of a link 'is unfair, as it has been promoted by enemies' poisonous propaganda' and that 'Saudi Arabia will never allow anyone to impose changes in its national educational curricula.'[2]

The current debate raises a number of questions regarding the role of education within the Saudi political system: To what extent has the education system been shaped and used by religious, political and socioeconomic forces and interests? What are the domestic and global factors that are undermining the current system? What are the economic and social 'side-effects' of the heavy emphasis on religious teachings? What are the links—if any—between the education system and the message propagated inside the kingdom as well as abroad and Islamic extremism?

## Education and the religious foundations of the regime

The evolution of education in Saudi Arabia, the structure of the educational apparatus, and the content of teachings in Saudi schools, in Saudi-financed schools abroad and in the books widely distributed throughout the world, have been circumscribed by the concern to preserve the religious foundations of the regime. Islam continues to be the main legitimating source for the al-Saud family; however, the strong identification with Islam invites the regime's opponents to use it as a standard by which to judge their rulers.

[1] 'A nation challenged: education; anti-Western and extremist views pervade Saudi schools', *New York Times*, 19 Oct. 2001; *Boston Globe*, 13 Jan. 2002.
[2] 'Saudis will not allow changes imposed on national curricula', *Gulf News*, 7 March 2002.

The *ulama*, Muslim scholars with authority to pronounce on religious questions, are able to strengthen their influence in periods of political sensitivity. Many observers have noted that, in order to get the acquiescence and approval of the *ulama* for state policies, the government has made concessions to the religious authorities in the fields of culture, curriculum development and control over the educational apparatus. After the Mecca uprising in 1979, for instance, the Islamic content of the curriculum was reinforced and additional money was allocated to the building of mosques and to missionary activities. Schools ran summer centres to further the Islamic education of the students, the percentage of religious television and radio programmes rose, King Fahd opened the Islamic University of Umm al-Qura, and funding for other religious colleges and universities was increased.[3] This policy continued even during the mid-1980s, when oil revenues fell dramatically. By 1986 more than 16,000 of the kingdom's 100,000 students were enrolled in Islamic studies. By the early 1990s, one-quarter of all university students were studying in religious institutions.[4]

The influence of the *ulama* in the educational and social sphere is felt particularly strongly in respect of women's education and the role of women in public life. The establishment and expansion of female education were resisted by the most conservative social forces. As a compromise and to pacify the *ulama*, female education was placed under the supervision of the *ulama*-controlled General Presidency of Girls' Education. The General Presidency was merged with the ministry of education only after an incident in a girls' school in Mecca in March 2002 in which 15 girls died. The Saudi press reported that several members of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (the religious police) interfered with rescue efforts because the girls were not wearing the obligatory *abaya* (black cloak and scarf) and it would thus have been 'sinful to approach them'.[5] The religious police were blamed for intentionally obstructing the evacuation efforts, with the result that casualties were more numerous.[6] The incident caused widespread public outcry and prompted a debate about the role of the religious police. The government did not accept that the religious police were responsible; however, it dismissed the Head of the General Presidency and merged the Presidency with the ministry of education. To what extent this merger will reduce the sway of the *ulama* over education and give women greater freedom in educational and occupational choice remains to be seen.[7]

[3] Maher Abouhaseira, 'Education, political development, and stability in Saudi Arabia', PhD thesis, University of Southern California, 1998, p. 210.
[4] Gwenn Okruhlik, 'Networks of dissent: Islamism and reform in Saudi Arabia', *Current History*, Jan. 2002.
[5] 'Saudi Arabia: religious police role in school fire criticised', *Human Rights Watch*, 15 March 2002.
[6] *Arab News*, 14 March 2002.
[7] *Arab News*, 25 March 2002.

## The message

Religious education is emphasized at all levels of education in Saudi Arabia. The educational objectives of the country stress the importance of creating a sense of loyalty and obedience, and the duty of spreading the message and defending it against 'the enemies'. Education should 'promote a spirit of loyalty to Islamic law by denouncing any system or theory that conflicts with it and by behaving with honesty and in conformity with Islamic tenets'; it should 'awaken the spirit of Islamic struggle, fight our enemies, restore our rights, resume our glory and fulfil the mission of Islam' and 'project the unity of the Muslim nation'.[8]

The main religious subjects taught in Saudi schools are: Qur'an, Tawhid (declaration of the oneness of God), Tajwid (recitation), Tafsir (interpretation, commentary on the Qur'an), Hadith (record of the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions) and Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Most of these subjects continue to be taught at university level. Around 30 per cent of weekly hours in elementary school are dedicated to religious subjects; in intermediate school the proportion is 24 per cent and in secondary school around 35 per cent for those students in the Shari'a and Arabic branch and approximately 14 per cent for those in the technical and natural science branch. History classes (history of the Islamic civilization, history of the life of the Prophet and his companions, history of Saudi Arabia, history of Islam) and Arabic literature classes are also heavily influenced by Islamic teachings.[9]

The amount of religious teachings in university courses varies. In departments such as art, history and administration, approximately 40–45 per cent of teaching hours are dedicated to religious teachings and Arabic classes. Three of the country's seven main universities focus on religious studies; with the exception of the Islamic University they offer a variety of subjects and degrees, but in comparison to other universities there is much more emphasis on religious subjects. Students at the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, for instance, a university dedicated to technical subjects and with English as the main medium of teaching, are required to take 14 semester credit hours in Islamic and Arab Studies, amounting to approximately 10–15 per cent of the curriculum. In the first year of study students are required to take the course in Islamic ideology 'to vitalize the students' knowledge of, and commitment to, Islamic doctrines, seeking thereby to fortify them against the onslaught of godless ideologies … [with] a consideration of the position of the contemporary Muslim vis-à-vis the different alien doctrines and the need for adherence to Islam and renunciation of all false ideologies'.[10]

Obedience to authority is emphasized in Saudi textbooks as an important duty of the citizen: 'Obey Allah and his Prophet and those with authority.' This

[8] *Educational policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh: Ministry of Education, 1978), pp. 5, 6–9.
[9] Data from Saudi Ministry of Education.
[10] www.kfupm.edu.sa/ias/courses.htm (accessed 22 Jan. 2002).

obedience is enjoined on several levels: obedience is due to the rulers and to the teacher, as well as to the head of the family. The benefits of obedience are manifold: a unified society, security and reassurance, and reward from God.[11] Disobedience is equated with trying to create *fitna*, dissension, an accusation that has also been used to discredit dissenting voices. While the ruler must uphold Islamic law, the *ulama* should support him, but only as long as he follows Islamic law: 'A Muslim should listen and obey … unless he is ordered not to obey God.'[12]

The way history is taught in Saudi schools reflects the government's aim of unifying the population and creating a common Saudi identity. History books ignore the history of non-Najdi Saudi Arabia, the history of the Hejaz, the Asir and the Shi'a. They glorify the role of Abdul Aziz (Ibn Saud) in unifying the tribes and regions, in establishing order and security and, most importantly, in giving the conquered tribes the chance to return to the right path of Islam.[13] No mention is made of the bloodshed and the fights that accompanied part of the conquest of the Arabian Peninsula. History books contain glorious and idealized accounts of the Islamic empires, particularly during the first centuries of Islam's expansion. Contemporary and recent developments and critical events in the Arab world, such as Nasserite Egypt, pan-Arabism, revolutions in neighbouring countries and their origins and ideologies, as well as the Gulf War, are not taught.

The message propagated in Saudi schoolbooks is reinforced by the teaching method. Religious subjects in particular place heavy emphasis on rote learning; lessons are very repetitive and often use complex language not always appropriate to the age of the students. This philosophy of teaching inculcates passivity, dependence, an *a priori* respect for authority and an unquestioning attitude. Many Saudi students and professors complain that there is too little emphasis on analytical and creative thinking. Interaction between the teacher and his/her students is limited; debate is often absent as the sources of knowledge, the Qur'an and Sunna, are considered inviolable.

The content of the official textbooks is heavily influenced by the Wahhabi ideology.[14] Teaching about the 'others'—other cultures, ideologies and religions, or adherents of other Muslim schools of jurisprudence or sects—reflects the Wahhabi view of a world divided into the believers and preservers of the true faith and the *kuffar*, the unbelievers. The teachings about other religions, particularly those pertaining to the 'People of the Book', Christians and Jews, are contradictory. While some passages denounce Christians and Jews clearly as unbelievers, people whom one should not greet with salutations of peace or take as friends, or against whom *jihad* should be waged, other passages stress the

[11] Saudi Ministry of Education, 'Al-hadith', 2nd grade, intermediate, boys, p. 23; 'Al-hadith', 1st grade, secondary (1st part), boys, p. 58.
[12] Ministry of Education, 'Al-tawhid wa al-hadith wa al-fiqh wa al-tawhid', 6th grade, elementary (2nd part), boys, 1999, p. 23.
[13] 'Tarikh al-mamlaka al-arabiyya al-saudiyya', 6th grade, elementary, boys, p. 11.
[14] Wahhabis are the followers of the teachings of Mohammed Abd Al Wahhab (1703–92), who called for a return to the fundamentals of Islam. Wahhabis are often also referred to as 'salafis'.

peaceful nature of Islam.[15] The concept of *jihad* (struggle or holy war) features prominently in the religious textbooks, which distinguish three aspects of *jihad*: the spiritual or personal *jihad*, the striving against sin and sinful inclinations; the *jihad* against the enemy, which should be fought with weapons; and the *jihad* with the tongue, through speeches etc. The same paragraph of the textbook that lists these definitions talks about Islam as a religion of love and peace, highlighting the often contradictory messages disseminated to Saudi students.[16]

Schoolbooks refer to many religious practices, such as celebrating the Prophet's birthday, as dangerous innovations of the religion (*bid'a*); the practice of worshipping graves is considered *shirk* (polytheism). Chapter after chapter, particularly the Tawhid textbooks, decry practices such as worshipping graves, fortune-telling, seeking treatment through witchcraft, sorcery, etc., and categorize them into forms of sin of varying gravity. For instance, crying and raising the voice after someone's death and the repetition of good attributes of the deceased person, a practice typical of the Hejaz, is considered one of the major sins. Punishments and rewards in the afterlife are also elaborately discussed.

Until 1993 schoolbooks openly denounced Shi'a and Sufi beliefs as *bid'a*, and Shi'a were referred to as *rafida*, a very derogatory term.[17] Shi'a are often referred to also as *mushrikeen* (polytheists) or unbelievers, against whom it is a duty to lead *jihad*. Students are warned against mixing with the 'innovators' unless to advise them, as mixing with them could have a dangerous influence. A Tawhid book of 1992 also mentioned that the *ulama* devote great efforts to denouncing the practice of *bid'a*, thus raising awareness among Muslims of the importance of getting rid of the innovations and suppressing or destroying the innovators.[18] The same book also blames countries of unbelievers for encouraging the innovators and assisting them in tarnishing the image of religion.[19] In relation to the Shi'a these accusations were addressed towards the Islamic Republic of Iran which, until a thaw in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia (around 1997/8 and 1999), was accused of fomenting unrest among the Saudi Shi'a. The curriculum was changed, reportedly after protests, and the term *rafida* is no longer used in official school textbooks.[20] Since then, the 'repugnant' and 'deviating' aspects and religious practices are no longer attributed to one particular sect or religion. Nevertheless, Shi'a beliefs continue to be denounced in books distributed at Saudi-financed mosques both within the country and abroad.[21] Shi'a or members of other religious minorities are also not allowed to teach religion in Saudi schools.

[15] 'Al-hadith', 2nd grade, intermediate (1st part), girls, p. 36; 'Al-tarbiyya al-wataniyya', 3rd grade, secondary (1st part), boys, p. 27.
[16] 'Al-hadith', 2nd grade, intermediate (1st part), girls, p. 36; 'Al-tarbiyya al-wataniyya', 3rd grade, secondary (1st part), boys, p. 27.
[17] 'Al-tawhid', 3rd grade, secondary, 1992, pp. 79, 87, 93, 107.
[18] Ibid., p. 102.
[19] Ibid., p. 107.
[20] Interview with Ali Al Ahmed, Director of Saudi Institute, McLean, United States, in March 2002.
[21] Interviews conducted in London and the Arab world in 2002.

Jews or Jewish conspiracy are blamed for many historical events: they 'used the French revolution to attack religions' and are responsible for Marxism.[22] A Yemenite Jew, Abdullah bin Saba'a, is alleged to have caused the split of the Muslim community into Shi'a and Sunni.[23] One Tawhid book for the ninth grade (boys) quotes a *hadith* (saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and his companions) by Abu Hureira: 'The day of Judgement will not come until Muslims fight the Jews and Muslims kill them, until the Jew hides behind a stone or a tree and the stone or the tree will say: oh Muslim, servant of God, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.'[24] The close relationship between Jews and Americans is also highlighted in Saudi history books: 'Their [the Palestinians'] *jihad* almost succeeded if it was not for the assistance of the American government at the side of the Jews, which demanded the British to allow the entry of more than 100,000 Jews to Palestine in one year.'[25] These historical distortions can, combined with the current situation in the Occupied Territories which features prominently in the Saudi and Arab media, feed religious intolerance and extremist positions.

There are hesitant signs that the government is becoming more aware of the effects of what is taught in Saudi schools. The government claims that only 5 per cent of the curriculum could be considered as objectionable, while 85 per cent of the materials used in schools calls for an understanding of other faiths and 10 per cent is subject to interpretation by the teachers. The Saudi foreign minister concluded that on this basis the Saudi education system cannot be considered a 'breeder of terrorism', and indicated that the government is working to remove the objectionable messages.[26] Attempts are also being made to change teaching methods, to introduce modern technology, to reduce rote learning and encourage analytical thinking.[27]

Formal education is only one element in shaping an individual's perspective and religious inclinations. The perception of Saudi students is also shaped to an equal if not greater degree by informal teachings in mosques, in homes and through the new media. The mosque is particularly important for the older generation since adult illiteracy rates remain high.[28] Additionally, the so-called 'hidden curriculum'—contextual factors, such as teacher personality, prevailing classroom dynamics, social background or place of residence—also determine how the message is received and interpreted. There is likely to be a difference of experience between students in public schools and those in the private schools, which offer additional courses, and between schools in the more conservative

[22] 'Al-hadith', 1st grade, secondary (2nd part), boys, p. 105.
[23] 'Al-tawhid', 3rd grade, intermediate (2nd part), girls, p. 102.
[24] 'Al-tawhid', 3rd grade, secondary (2nd part), p. 80.
[25] 'Tarikh al-mamlaka al-saudiyya', 6th grade, elementary, boys, 1999; 'Al-tarikh', 3rd grade, intermediate (2nd part), girls, p. 88.
[26] John Duke Anthony, 'The American–Saudi relationship: a briefing by HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs', *Gulfwire Newsletter*, 13 Oct. 2002.
[27] 'Saudis will not allow changes imposed on national curricula', *Gulf News*, 7 March 2002.
[28] Adult illiteracy rates (1995): overall 37.2 per cent (women 49.8 per cent, men 28.5 per cent). See UNESCO, Division of Statistics, www.unesco.org/doha/countries/saudi.htm.

areas of the Najd and those in the more open coastal cities in the Hejaz or the Eastern Province.[29]

Learning experiences are also continually modified by the impact of global information flows. Access to foreign mass media through travel and satellite television has opened new channels of information circumventing the tightly controlled Saudi media. In 1998 the government legalized the public use of the internet; however, it invested heavily in blocking 'objectionable' websites.[30] Globalized communication tools are used by both the government and the religious opposition. Speeches and *fatawa* (religious opinions) of influential popular clerics are often posted on the internet or distributed outside the mosques. Chat-rooms have become very popular outlets for political discontent and debate. The internet also provides Saudis with links outside the Muslim community and to other Arab and Muslim countries, thus giving many debates a transnational dimension. Issues such as the attacks of 11 September, events in Afghanistan and the al-Aqsa intifada feature prominently in online discussions.

The so-called concept of *al Walaa'* (love and alliance) with the community of true believers and *al Bara'a* (hate and opposition) towards those outside constitutes an important element in the pamphlets and *fatawa* of the establishment *ulama*. The language is even stronger and much more direct in the teachings of the unofficial or dissident clerics. The duty to disobey an un-Islamic ruler or a ruler who has departed the right path is very clearly articulated in opposition discourse. The opposition clerics argue that many Muslim rulers have, through their military connections and political alignments, become 'puppets' of the West and its Zionist allies. They have thus left the Muslim faith and become like the unbelievers. By inviting 'infidel' forces to defend the 'Holy Land of Islam', the al-Saud have become the 'functional equivalent of foreign occupiers' and Muslims have the duty to rise up, engage in a *jihad* and rectify the situation.[31]

## Exporting the message and its messengers

The Wahhabi-inspired worldview, combined with the proselytizing fervour of the messengers, can easily act as a destabilizing force when the message is exported to countries where the majority of the population are not followers of the Wahhabi interpretation, or in a context of conflict between Muslims and 'unbelievers'.

The Saudi kingdom's involvement in the educational sphere abroad includes building and funding new mosques, Islamic cultural centres, schools and universities, as well as providing generous scholarships and assistance to perform the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). Another important activity is the diffusion of the Qur'an and religious textbooks, as well as the publication and distribution of

[29] Interviews with Saudi students.

[30] The King Abdul Aziz Centre for Science and Technology controls access to the internet. Approximately 400,000 sites were off-limit for Saudis. Human Rights Watch report, 'Saudi Arabia', 2002.

[31] Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'The new global threat: transnational salafis and *jihad*', *Middle East Policy* 8: 4, Dec. 2001, p. 27.

works by Islamist intellectuals, many of whom are prevented for political reasons from publishing in their country of origin.[32] Saudi influence, both direct and indirect, is also exerted through the largely Saudi-owned Arab media and publishing companies.[33] Migrant workers, who often spend extended periods in Saudi Arabia and whose children often attend Saudi schools, are also 'carriers' of the religious message back to their own country. Saudi-financed schools abroad recruit their students from all over the globe and train a new generation of mosque leaders and clerics who, once returned to their own countries, open schools or religious centres spreading the Wahhabi-inspired worldview from Morocco to Indonesia, thereby creating a transnational network.[34] The kingdom also sponsors several pan-Islamic organizations, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the World Association of Muslim Youth, to promote the Saudi version of Islam.

Power considerations, including political and religious rivalry with Iran and other contenders for the 'leadership of the Muslim world' as well as the need to placate internal religious dissent, provided the main rationale for the Saudi state's support of missionary activities. The massive influx of petrodollars in the 1970s and early 1980s provided the Saudis with the money to invest heavily in the propagation of their message. The support and funding of religious movements, schools and charities also have an important domestic dimension. By exporting the message and its carriers, the Saudi government was able to contain and control potential opponents and divert their attention away from the kingdom and its 'unholy alliance' with the West, and from allegations of corruption and profligacy. This domestic dimension of the 'export of extremists' has often been underestimated and overlooked.[35] Many have also misunderstood the nature, influence and objectives of the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia, which led to a failure to predict the developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the resistance to American and western influence after the Gulf War.[36] The policy of exporting messages and messengers abroad began to backfire in the 1990s. Many of the so-called 'Arab Afghans' returned to the kingdom after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and came to form the core of the militant domestic opposition. Their return was shortly followed by the Kuwait crisis and the ruling family's decision to invite the 'infidels' to defend the country; hence the Saudi regime and its western allies became the new focus of criticism and the new target against whom *jihad* was to be waged.

[32] Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994).

[33] Saudi-owned Arabic newspapers and magazines include *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, *Al Hayat*, *Al Muslimun* and *Al Majalla*. TV stations include the Middle East Broadcast Corporation and Orbit. There are also numerous publishing houses that receive government support or whose publications are distributed in Saudi-financed mosques worldwide. For instance, Darussalam Global Leaders in Islamic Books has branches in Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, the UK, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Kuwait and Bangladesh. The Mecca Information Centre also distributes copies of Wahhabi teachings during hajj, free or at nominal cost.

[34] Wiktorowicz, 'The new global threat', p. 23.

[35] Interview with Saudi opposition members, London, Feb. 2002.

[36] Nawaf Obaid, 'The power of Saudi Arabia's Islamic leaders', *Middle East Quarterly* 6: 3, Sept. 1999, p. 57.

Saudi influence in the educational sphere extends from Morocco to Central Asia, to Bosnia and elsewhere in Europe. It is also felt in many African countries, particularly in Sudan, but also in Mali, Nigeria, Chad and Senegal, where Muslim missionaries, many of them from Saudi Arabia, are reported to have taken hundreds of new recruits abroad for religious teaching.[37] Saudi influence and Saudi money have also spread to many countries in Asia, including Xinjiang province in China.[38] Saudi government, charities and individual citizens are also financing mosque centres, schools and other religious institutions in Western countries. The 16 King Fahd Academies, located inter alia in the United Kingdom and the United States, use the Saudi curriculum, including its religious teachings. Many of the publication centres that propagate Wahhabi material are based or have branches in Europe or the United States.

As the Wahhabi interpretation is alien to the Islam prevalent in most of the countries to which it is 'exported', the influx of Arab money and missionaries often causes friction with local religious authorities and community leaders. In Central Asia, for instance, there is a mixture of various brands of Islam and Sufi practices are widespread. As noted above, Wahhabi ideology rejects many of the practices of Sufism as heretical and labels its adherents *mushrikeen* (polytheists). The severely puritanical nature of Wahhabism is certainly one of the main obstacles to its taking root more widely. The requirement of women to veil completely (often including the face veil) is alien to societies that had become largely secularized under communist governments. There are many reports from Central Asia, Bosnia, Kosovo and the Arab world that schools funded by Saudi charities or the Saudi state require female students to wear the veil. There are also reports that Saudi Arabia pays for the costs of the religious garb and in some cases gives money to parents to enable their daughters to wear 'appropriate' Islamic dress.[39] However, while the message may not take root among mainstream Muslims in many countries, it does resonate among those groups or individuals in opposition to the current governments and political establishments, and can thus represent an element of instability.

After 11 September, Saudi Arabia's role in financing and supporting extremist interpretations of Islam across the Muslim world intensified. It is important to distinguish between assistance destined for humanitarian purposes and cases where funds have been diverted—whether intentionally or not—to fund militant activities. It is also necessary to differentiate between schools that provide religious teachings with solely educational motives, and schools that use religion to incite hatred towards others and that have been used by some individuals or groupings for political aims. The dividing lines may often be blurred; as detailed above, even the message propagated in the official Saudi textbooks contains elements that condone intolerance and that can be considered as inciting hatred towards others. One also has to be careful not to jump to the conclusion that

[37] 'Muslim clerics send troubling message', *Washington Post*, 30 Sept. 2001, A24.
[38] *Le monde diplomatique*, Feb. 2002, p. 9.
[39] Interview, Jordan, April 2002.

the Saudi state and religious hierarchy in their entirety identify with armed militancy. Many members of the political and religious regime do not accept the permissibility of *jihad* and the use of militancy for political and religious ends. However, those groupings and individuals waging *jihad* against the West are intrinsically linked to the Wahhabi-inspired worldview.[40]

Education in *madrasas* (religious schools) has been the main method of teaching throughout the Islamic world for more than a thousand years. It has provided many students who might otherwise have had no educational opportunity with the means to read and write. In many countries where Saudi Arabia finances schools and religious institutions, the public school system is extremely deficient, and families are often unable to pay tuition fees for private schools. While the *madrasas*' students come from various social backgrounds, the majority of them are poor; some schools even pay the parents to send their children to be taught. This has been particularly the case in Pakistan, where Saudi influence in the educational sphere has been strong. Certainly not all graduates of Saudi-financed *madrasas* are militant, fanatical, or intrinsically anti-western or anti-American. Most become clerics, prayer leaders, teachers or preachers; those engaging in militant activities are an exception. However, some of the *madrasas* at the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, which received funding from Saudi Arabia and other Muslim states, differ from traditional *madrasas* in being less concerned with religious scholarship than with preaching a distorted version of *jihad*. Graduates of these schools were given particular training and ideological preparation and became political tools in the conflict in Afghanistan, against the Hindus in Kashmir or in other locations where Muslims are threatened.[41]

## Demography, education and the economic imperative to change

Serious efforts towards reforming the religious education system and adaping its message to contemporary realities, or even a serious debate about the role of religious education and its message, have not yet begun in Saudi Arabia. There is, however, an impetus for educational reform, driven primarily by demographic pressures and economic difficulties.[42] As early as 1990, in a petition to the rulers, many prominent businessmen demanded a review of the country's educational policy, stating: 'We believe that our country's educational system is in need of comprehensive and fundamental reform to enable it to graduate faithful generations that are qualified to contribute positively and effectively in building the present and the future of the country, and to face the challenges of the age, enabling us to catch up with the caravan of nations that have vastly surpassed us in every field.'[43] The development of the educational system in the 1970s emphasized quantitative expansion and infrastructural development rather than

[40] Wiktorowicz, 'The new global threat', p. 19.
[41] Jessica Stern, 'Pakistan's *jihad* culture', *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 2000.
[42] See e.g. Gazi al-Gosaibi in *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 17 Feb. 2002.
[43] 'Empty reforms—Saudi Arabia's new basic laws', *Human Rights Watch*, May 1992.

qualitative improvements. Until the late 1980s the governmental apparatus absorbed most Saudi graduates from foreign, secular and religious institutions alike, often regardless of their actual qualifications and capabilities, engendering the expectation that once one had graduated or even left school, a job was secure.

The Saudi population is growing fast, from an estimated 21.4 million in 1999 (including 5.7 million non-Saudis) to about 29.7 million in 2020. Furthermore, the working-age population is estimated to increase to 3.99 million in 2004 and to 8.26 million in 2020. Government employment, with the exception of the education and health sectors, is expected to remain at the same level; consequently, the private sector is expected to absorb the majority of the new entrants to the labour market.[44] Currently, new jobs are created for only one-quarter of the total number of job entrants.[45] Under the present economic circumstances, academic performance and technical skills are increasingly important. With more and more job entrants and fewer government jobs, competition is fierce, and many of those Saudis who have been educated abroad or at the more 'secular' Saudi universities find it easier to get jobs in the private sector, where proficiency in English is often required. With the state no longer able to provide positions for all, once the differences in levels of education start to be reflected more markedly in recruitment practices, feelings of resentment and marginalization could begin to emerge among those with a traditional educational background.

Saudi Arabia's lack of skilled employees is a direct result of the country's educational and economic policy during the oil boom years.[46] There is a huge gap between the output of the education system and the requirements of the domestic labour market. In many specialities, the number of graduates exceeds the actual requirements of the labour market in terms of occupational classification and job description. Between 1995 and 1999 only 10,000 of the total number of 120,000 students graduating from Saudi universities had a degree in technical subjects, accounting for only 2 per cent of the total number of Saudis entering the job market.[47] If this mismatch is to be rectified, standards and enrolment ratios in general and higher education must be raised. Enrolment ratios in Saudi schools are relatively low: in 1996 they amounted to 76 per cent for primary, 61 per cent for secondary and 16 per cent for tertiary education.[48] Equally, drop-out rates are high: over 40 per cent of Saudis finish their education before reaching secondary school, with approximately 28 per cent of the new entrants to the labour market being drop-outs from elementary and adult vocational training programmes.[49]

The challenge is two-fold: first, the skills of graduates must be matched with the demands of the employment market, which involves a move from quantitative

[44] Saudi Ministry of Planning, Seventh Development Plan, 2000–2004, p. 160.
[45] Economist Intelligence Unit, *EIU Country Report: Saudi Arabia*, 2001/2002.
[46] Delwin Roy, 'Saudi Arabian education: development policy', *Middle Eastern Studies* 28: 3, July 1992.
[47] 'People pressure', *The Economist*, 21 March 2002.
[48] *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook*, 1998 and 1999.
[49] Saudi Ministry of Planning, Sixth Development Plan, 1995–1999/2000, p. 179.

expansion to qualitative improvement of the educational system. Second—and by far the most daunting challenge—sufficient employment opportunities must be created by increasing the proportion of native Saudis in the workforce, introducing economic reforms to attract investment and encouraging the participation of the private sector in employment creation.

The government has become increasingly aware of the need to change the education system to ensure the economic survival of the country, and is emphasizing qualitative improvement. More emphasis is also placed on vocational and technical training; however, attendance in these areas is below expectations, as the status, prestige and tradition associated with government positions continue to deter students from enrolling in technical and vocational courses. Efforts to 'Saudi-ize' the workforce face a number of obstacles, including the alleged distaste of Saudis for certain types of work, their lower productivity and the often huge wage discrepancies between Saudis and non-Saudis. However, there are signs of gradual attitudinal changes regarding certain types of manual work; Saudis increasingly work in the banking and service sector, and also as taxi drivers. Nevertheless, the number of expatriates working in the kingdom has continued to grow, rising by 1.5 per cent during the last years of the Sixth Development Plan between 1995 and 1999/2000.[50] The presence of expatriates also has religious and political implications and has always been viewed critically by some groups, particularly the *ulama* and the religious opposition. With unemployment rising among Saudis, resentment towards the large migrant worker community, particularly those expatriates occupying better-remunerated positions, could rise. This could have ramifications for the stability of the regime, as perhaps already witnessed in the recent spate of bombings involving expatriates.

The *ulama* also resist changes regarding women's participation in the employment market. More and more Saudi women are highly educated and are pressing for more employment opportunities and a wider range of occupational choice. Women now represent more than 50 per cent of all university students. The lack of public transport for women remains a serious inhibiting factor in taking up employment and limits their choice of work. The forced segregation of half of the population necessitates the employment of chauffeurs (estimated at half a million), affordable to only the richer segments of society. Some observers have also suggested that, unable to create enough employment opportunities for the male population, the regime may also continue emphasizing its gender segregation policies.[51]

## The challenge of reforming the system

Reform of the education system and the content of religious teachings is likely to meet strong resistance and will have repercussions for both the relationship

[50] Saudi Ministry of Planning, Seventh Development Plan, p. 158.
[51] Eleanor Doumato, 'Women and work in Saudi Arabia: how flexible are Islamic margins?', *Middle East Journal* 52: 2, Spring, p. 582.

between the *ulama* and the government and the political future of the al-Saud. Confronted with public international criticism and American demands for religious education syllabuses and teaching practices to be changed, even more liberally minded Saudis have come out to defend 'their' education system, saying that education 'is an issue of national sovereignty' and Saudis 'will not let any country interfere'.[52] The Saudi media has portrayed the criticisms of the country's religious education system as a conspiracy and an attack against Islam; the perception is that 'America is trying to instruct us what to read.'[53] Thus 'we are defending our school curricula against western attack as if we were prisoners before an interrogation.'[54] Sheikh Saud al-Shreim, the imam at the Haram of Mecca, declared that changing the content of religious education would be tantamount to 'high treason'.[55] The religious opposition may view any revision of the curriculum as a sign of weakness on the part of the rulers and further evidence of their subservience to America.[56] Even before 11 September, Sheikh Safar al-Hawali, a popular dissident cleric, called upon Muslims to be 'aware of the subtle changes being introduced into our educational curricula. We are obligated to increase the comprehension of our students to those Quranic verses and statements of the Prophet … pertaining to the plots of the Jews toward us.'[57]

Resistance to curriculum change should not be regarded as necessarily negative. It may provide a starting point for a dialogue among various stakeholders that will be important not only in respect of curriculum development but also for the emergence and involvement of a more active civil society. The debate, if allowed to take place openly and with the participation of the population, may also trigger a more far-reaching discussion about national identity, the political future of the country and the relationships between the government, the *ulama* and the people. There are some positive signs; several high-ranking Saudi officials, including Crown Prince Abdullah, have called the events of 11 September an opportunity for self-scrutiny. The foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, declared that 'if something good is to come of September, it is that all parties concerned will look at themselves and see what they can do to avoid a repetition of such crises'; and the education minister that 'it is of great importance to utilise those impacts [of 11 September] to serve our community. We do not claim that we are living on an isolated island, as the whole world has become a small global village. However, our national educational curricula never urged extreme thinking.'[58]

[52] Interviews, London, Feb. 2002.
[53] Interview, London, Feb. 2002.
[54] Ali Sa'ad al-Musa in *al-Watan*, *Mideast Mirror*, 7 Feb. 2002, p. 16.
[55] Hamza Olayen in the *Daily Star*, *Mideast Mirror*, 5 Feb. 2002.
[56] Interview with Saad al-Faqih, Director of the Movement of Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) in London, Feb. 2002.
[57] 'Ten recommendations for the Muslim Ummah', www.as-sahwah.com, accessed 4 March 2002.
[58] 'Saudis will not allow changes imposed on national curricula', *Gulf News*, 7 March 2002.