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## Critical thoughts on critical thinking in Saudi Arabia

BOBBY THOMAS CAMERON 21 July 2011

***Saudi Arabia's government is infusing billions of riyals into programmes and services, much of which is oriented towards education. There is a fundamental contradiction in this endeavour.***

Currently Saudi Arabia's government is [infusing billions of riyals](#) into programmes and services, much of which is oriented towards [education](#), all in an attempt to transform the country's economy and population so that it can become fully integrated into the global economy. One questions how such reforms will pan out, however, given the fact that critical thought in Saudi Arabia is frequently [stifled](#). In order for a country to develop both economically and socially it is necessary that citizens are provided with the skills and opportunities to locate, discuss, and solve problems. Yet, in reflecting on my experiences teaching English at a technical college in Saudi Arabia, I gather that the majority of youth in the country are not equipped with critical thought skills or provided the opportunities to display dissatisfaction. In a repressive state will an education system ever teach citizens to engage in the kind of critique which leads to development?

One does not have to spend much time researching education in Saudi Arabia to notice that the majority of articles on the topic are negative. The historical roots of education reform in Saudi Arabia, and the way in which the first King Abdulaziz Al-Saud built its entire infrastructure from the ground-up, may offer many lessons to be learned. But although there are reports which applaud the construction of multimillion dollar educational facilities for their sheer ambition, the actual quality of education delivered in these centres has yet to be determined. I am not a lone critic. Indeed there is a mountain of news articles, reports, and academic studies which document and analyze various negative or out-dated aspects of education in Saudi Arabia. But this article concentrates on one measure to solve Saudi's educational crisis that requires more than throwing money at it. Fostering critical thought skills, which the majority of Saudi youth lack, needs to be an integral component of the Saudi administration's reforms if the country wants to realize its development goals.

I was teaching in Saudi Arabia from September, 2010 to July, 2011, when other than a few demonstrations which were promptly extinguished by government

security, no major upheavals took place. I began to question why in Saudi Arabia - where there is a massive unemployed youth population - similar protests were not occurring as they were in other Middle East and North African countries. Was it because of the millions of dollars the King distributed to the poor and students? Although such acts do have a band-aid affect, the explicit violence and public displays of dissatisfaction which were occurring in countries surrounding Saudi Arabia surely trumped any financial displays of affection that the King showed his people? Surely Saudis subconsciously – if not consciously – must be affected by the democratic winds sweeping across neighbouring countries ?

Speaking with Saudis, I soon gathered that I was wrong. Indeed, many Saudi youth saw the King's distribution of largesse as being truly remarkable: such actions could only come from a "good King" who had his people's best interests in mind. In my classroom, students were eager to tell me about "Baba Abdullah's" return to Saudi Arabia and how he had graciously given Saudis financial support. No-one in my classroom or in conversation with my Saudi colleagues when the subject came up, ever suggested that such actions did little to alleviate youth [unemployment](#); help in the lifting of restrictive social policies (such as a ban on cinemas, which many Saudi youth want); or provide for more relaxed regulations regarding the separation of the genders (again, which many middle-class Saudi youth yearn for).

There are certain educated groups of progressive reformists in the Kingdom who are quite critical of the current state of affairs in the Kingdom. But this group, stifled by strict censorship, overall, has little effect on the current government's policies. I believe that such actions are not scrutinized the way government spending is in other countries because in general, Saudi youth lack critical thought skills. Those who do, are completely stifled by the censorship which prevails in the overarching absolutist state.

Critical thought is not a skill which is cultivated in the Saudi educational system. In a country where there is a literal interpretation of Islamic principles, reading the Koran supports memorization and recitation as the preferred way to learn. From an early age, Saudi students are encouraged to learn through rote memorization. This begins with Koranic studies, but this method is applied in all other subject areas including maths, science, and history.

Memorization and recitation, originally a British tradition, made global through conquest and colonization, continues to be the preferred pedagogical method in the Kingdom and is now frequently referred to as an "Asian" method, when its origins are without a doubt British. I encountered much frustration in my classroom when students saw no point at all in discussing topics. What they wanted was that information should be presented to them in exactly the same form it might appear in a test. In my Saudi classroom I encountered criticism in unison from students if I suggested discussing photos, newspaper headlines, or opinion pieces; comment - let alone proceeding to discuss their findings with their peers!

This type of pedagogy and lesson was not seen as being useful, yet such activities develop literacy and critical thought skills – both of which are regarded as implicit yet vital in the education I have received. My students saw no use in questioning the reliability of authors, thinking about their backgrounds or biases and the accumulative effect this had on what they wrote. Rather, even when reading newspaper articles or other short pieces, students preferred to locate the main idea and memorize it in hopes that they would be tested on this point in the future. When they were given the opportunity to voice their opinions or react to a short story, their reactions were usually basic, preferring again to restate exactly what they had read. I believe that I received such a reaction from students because the Saudi education system either explicitly or implicitly discourages critical thought, as it poses a serious danger to the Kingdom and the power which is held by a select group of elites.

If Saudis were to be taught to question authority, discuss the origins of information, identify problems, and debate solutions, a very different populous would soon emerge. Indeed, the King's decision to administer millions of dollars to his citizens and his decision to call a surprise national holiday would without

a doubt be received in a different light. Fareed Zakaria, who in *The Post-American World* (paperback edition, 2009) recalls and criticizes his experiences as a student in India where he memorized vast quantities of material, regurgitated it for exams, and then promptly forgot it - attributes much of the US's [erstwhile success](#) in producing entrepreneurs, inventors, and "risk takers" to the American educational system which "teaches you to think." The US system he writes, nurtures and rewards ingenuity, quick thinking, and problem solving.

If critical thought skills are a fundamental component of development, is Saudi Arabia able to "develop" in all senses of the word – both socially and economically – and still maintain its absolute monarchy? I doubt it. If Saudi Arabia wants to become a truly developed country then it requires a population of global-minded and globalized citizens, able to appreciate people who think differently. Developing one's academic faculties is necessary for social development because it ultimately supports economic development. It brings about ingenuity, creative thought, and the desire to correct inconsistencies as well as find, isolate, and solve problems.

Yet if Saudi Arabia continues on its current path – complete with sending thousands of students abroad for foreign study and building state of the art research facilities staffed with western academics – then undoubtedly critical thought skills will be adopted by more Saudi citizens (what some may call *westernization*).

What will the future hold if all Saudis are given the chance to research, question, read, and analyze their government's decisions and the actions of others?

Meanwhile, populations in countries around Saudi Arabia have begun to question their government's actions and are asking serious questions. The combination of this factor with the government's decision to send students abroad and develop westernized research centres in Saudi Arabia may well have dramatic results. Conflicts will undoubtedly arise from the more educated, global-minded citizens who will start to question their government's decisions.



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