



SAUDI ARABIA by Maria Smirnova

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Overview

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932 and occupies about four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula (Oliver, 1987, p.2). It is about one-third the size of the continental United States, covering 865,000 square miles. The Official Energy Statistics of the United States indicates that the Kingdom is also the world's leading petroleum exporter (Energy Information Administration, 2009). Oil accounts for more than 90 percent of exports and nearly 75 percent of government revenues, facilitating the creation of a welfare state.

Education in Saudi Arabia is provided by the government, free of charge, to all Saudis and children of Arabic-speaking residents who want it, from kindergarten up to and including secondary school (Al Rawaf and Simmons 1991, p.287). Elementary school caters for children from 6-12 years, intermediate school from 12-15 and secondary, or high school, from 15-18. An elementary school certificate is necessary in order to enter intermediate school and an intermediate school certificate is required to enter secondary school.

The educational system of Saudi Arabia drives its essence from the Islamic faith and

tradition (Oliver, 1987, p.3). Accordingly, the first schools in the Arabian Peninsula, called *Kuttabs*, were organized during the early Islamic era, and taught boys and girls to read. A comprehensive national system of education, however, appeared in 1932 when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded. Then, a new era in education in Saudi Arabia began with the organization of the Ministry of Education in 1953. With the help of money from Saudi Arabia's vast oil reserves, there is a wide-spread expansion of educational institutions and enrollments that continues to the present time.

While the Ministry of Education oversees the majority of educational institutions and students in the country, the organization of the General Presidency of Girls' Education in 1960 and the Ministry of Higher Education in 1975 have helped develop that sector (Oliver 1987, p. 3-4). In general, the Saudi government considers education as a priority for the growth of the country, and there are several measures being taken to reform the educational system in the country (Al-Hajailan, 1999, p.1). This paper attempts to profile of the Saudi Arabian education system with particular focus on the special characteristics of education in the country, structure of schooling, the legal framework of education, homeschooling, school choice, and school distinctiveness.

Special characteristics of education in Saudi Arabia

An understanding of education in Saudi Arabia requires the awareness of its special characteristics (following based on Oliver 1987, pp. 4-8).

- *Emphasis on religion:* Religious studies are given emphasis in the Saudi schools. This is seen in the number of periods per week given to the study of Koran, Islamic tradition, jurisprudence, and theology. Saudi schools allocate nine periods per week at the elementary level, eight at the intermediate level, and four during the first two years and three during the final years in the general secondary school. Furthermore, every postsecondary and university program includes a religious studies requirement. In general, memorization of the Koran, and an understanding of both the theory of Islam and its applications to everyday life.
- *Separation of the Sexes:* The sexes are separated throughout the educational system; the exceptions are some private elementary schools in the first and second grades, and some medical school classes. This involves separate buildings and staff and, in some cases, separate institutions. At the university level, men teach women students by closed circuit television in those courses for which women teachers are not available. In the schools, the curriculum is the same for both sexes, with minor exceptions related to physical education and home economics.
- *Rapid Growth:* Saudi Arabia has seen rapid educational growth. For example,

during the country's first three five-year plans (1970-85), school enrollments increased by 192% at the elementary level, 375% at the intermediate level, and 712% at the secondary level. In the same period, the student population increased from about 597,000 to more than 2 million, and the number of male university graduates rose from 808 to 6,098, and female graduates from 27 to 3,284. Even though the extreme rapid growth put pressure on the education system, the availability of resources helped to maintain the growth.

- *Selectivity:* The Saudi education system is highly selective for a number of reasons. From elementary through secondary school, written examinations are required in every subject every year, except in the comprehensive secondary schools. Students who fail one or more examinations are required to repeat the entire grade. As a result, repeaters represent about 14% of the students, on average, at each grade level. Many others simply drop out; the dropout rate is an issue of national concern, and it is attributed in large to grade repetition. The basis for the selectivity of the system appears to be academic ability and motivation, since education is free for all, and poverty is almost nonexistent in the country.
- *Generous financial Support:* With the resources of a nation possessing one-quarter of the world's oil reserves, and with a strong commitment to improving and expanding education, Saudi Arabia provides generous support to educational institutions and to their staff, faculty, and students. Education for all students is free at all levels. In addition, at the secondary level, stipends are provided to students studying at a distance from their homes and, beyond the secondary level, all students receive stipends as well as free housing, if needed, and heavily subsidized meals and transportation.
- *Use of Non-Saudi Teachers:* While the proportion of non-Saudi teachers, who mainly come from neighboring countries, has been declining, the government is greatly concerned about the continuing large numbers of non-Saudi teachers.
- *Centralization:* Two agencies—the Ministry of Education and the General Presidency of Girls' Education—direct almost all of the general elementary, intermediate, and secondary schools in Saudi Arabia, accounting for 93% of the students enrolled at these levels. The curriculum, textbooks, teacher qualifications and assignments, and general supervision in these schools are the same for both agencies, and also apply to private schools and those directed by other government agencies. All curriculum changes result from the actions of two national committees—the Committee of Educational Policies and the Supreme Committee of Educational Policies. Universities operate semi-autonomously under the Ministry of Higher Education except for the Islamic University, which is under the Council of Ministers.

- *Adaptation to Rapid Change:* At every level of education, there are a series of changes in the organization and level of educational programs. For example, kindergarten programs have been added, and the content and organization of secondary education are changing currently. In addition, the preparation of elementary school teachers has progressed from the intermediate level to the secondary level, and now to the postsecondary level.

The structure of schooling

There are four government agencies in Saudi Arabia that oversee educational programs and resources (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991, p.15; Ministry of Education, 2008, p.25). The Ministry of Education primarily supervises general education, from kindergarten to secondary levels, for male students. Post- secondary education for male students is the province of the Ministry of Higher Education. The General Presidency of Girls' Education manages programs for female students, including all levels of general education and post-secondary training. The General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training is responsible for the varied training programs that specialize in industrial, trade and agricultural subjects. Administrative responsibility for different segments of the Saudi education system is distributed among these four agencies that share a common mission of implementing new and forward- thinking school programs for Saudi citizens.

The Ministry of Education, established in 1953, is the largest educational agency in Saudi Arabia. Its responsibilities include a broad range of research and development related to educational policy, curriculum, and teaching methods and techniques (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991, p.15). The agency also oversees administration of male education at the kindergarten, elementary, intermediate and secondary levels in public and private schools. In addition, the Ministry supervises special education for male and female handicapped students. Last but not least, it promotes Saudi Arabian culture through the development of the public library system, museums and archeological research, and represents the kingdom in international educational organizations, symposia and seminars.

The Ministry of Higher Education was created in 1975 to implement national educational policy in the rapidly expanding sphere of post-secondary education (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991, p.20). The Ministry provides support and services for the kingdom's universities and colleges for male students. Departments are devoted to a variety of areas including the research and analysis of educational programs, planning and budgeting, government and private sector relations, engineering, and certificates evaluation. The Ministry also oversees educational missions in foreign countries which administer scholarships and supervise Saudi students studying abroad, and coordinates international inter- university relations.

The founding of the General Presidency of Girls' Education in 1960 marked the beginning

of state support for schools and training programs developed specifically for female students (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991, p.20). The Presidency has supervised significant expansion of the educational resources for female students, including the complete spectrum of schooling. The Directorate General for General Education directs schools and programs at the elementary, intermediate and secondary levels. Another division, under the supervision of the Deputy General of Girls' Colleges, oversees junior college, undergraduate and post graduate levels. In addition, the Presidency oversees specialized training institutes and technical training, tailoring and adult education.

The curricula used throughout the educational system undergo constant change and improvement in response to social and economic developments in the kingdom, as well as international developments in technology (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991, p. 67). National committees, established by the Ministry of Education in 1984, are devoted to curriculum development and review, and advise the Educational Development Department of the Ministry. These committees study the subjects being taught in schools at different levels and deal with special issues such as adult education, measurement and testing, special education, audiovisual aids, and student guidance and counseling. There is a close cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the General Presidency of Girls' Education on curriculum.

Children may enter the six-year elementary school at the age of six (Oliver, 1987, p.9). It provides every student with a foundation in Islamic culture and values, reading, writing and mathematics (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991, p.26). Children may begin elementary school at six years of age and students in each grade are generally within a two year age span. Only elementary level schooling is compulsory in Saudi Arabia.

A steady increase in the qualifications of teachers has paralleled and contributed to the development of the educational system in Saudi Arabia (Oliver, 1987, p.37). Teacher training programs have developed as an integral part of the education system in Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991, p. 58). Under the new system established to accommodate the updated requirements, secondary school graduates who earn two-year junior college degrees will be qualified to become teachers' assistants. Four-year Bachelor of Arts degrees are now required for new teachers in all levels of education.

The legal framework of education

Kathryn G. Heath (cited in Thomas 1968, pp.34-35) states the legal basis of for education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

Saudi Arabian Basic Law is Sharia Law, founded on the sacred book of Islam, the Koran. The 1926 *Constitution of the Kingdom of Hejaz* vested the "entire administration" in the hands of the King," bound by the standards of the noble Sharia" and made Arabic the "official" language. By Decree of January 29, 1927, the Sultanate of the Nejd and its Dependencies became united with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and provided that "All regulations, instructions, and degrees hereto issued by us shall continue to be valid and subsistent after this

change.”

A Decree of December 29, 1931, established the Council of Ministries. Article 18 of the May 11, 1958, edict, setting forth the regulations of the Council of Ministries, provides in part that “The Council of Ministers will formulate the internal, foreign, financial, economic, educational, and defense policies, plan for all public affairs of the State, and supervise their execution....”

The Ministry of Education (Wazarat Al-Macarif), functioning under a member of the Council of Ministries, has responsibility for education in the nation, except for military schools, which are administered by the Ministry of Defense and Aviation. Established in 1920 as a Directorate General of Education, it was a part of the Ministry of the Interior under Article 17 of the Decree establishing the Council of Ministers.

The Directorate became the Ministry of Education by decree on December 24, 1953, which also named the Minister of Education (Wazir Al-Macarif). Article 11 of *Royal Edict No. 380* includes “Heads of Ministries who are appointed by a Royal Decree proposed by the prime minister” among those who are members of the council of ministers.

Article 3 of this edict specifies that “No person except a Saudi shall be a member of the council of ministers and no person shall be a member of the council of ministers who has a bad reputation or has been convicted of a crime or felony.” . . .

Each of the areas into which the country is divided for administrative purposes, has a director of education to supervise education and an inspector to assist.

The 1926 Constitution of the Kingdom of Hejaz provided for “affairs of public instruction” as one of the “fundamental sections” of the kingdom, while others provide as follows:

Affairs of public instruction mean the diffusion of learning, skills and arts; the opening of schools (primary and secondary); the scrupulous promotion of scientific (religious) institutes; and the special care to be accorded to the principles of the true religion throughout the kingdom of the Hejaz. A law on public instruction shall be promulgated, and its provisions shall be applied progressively. Primary teaching shall be free in all parts of the Kingdom.

High Order No. 14/1/1358 defined the system of public education in 1939. The royal decree establishing the ministry provided that, “the Minister of Education will take charge of all affairs pertaining to education in the Kingdom and pertaining to the development of education to a standard befitting this country.” Royal Edict No. 380, pertinent decisions of the council of ministers (including operating procedures of the Ministry of Education), and internal regulations of the ministry provide specific

authority for the Minister of Education and the ministry.

Royal decrees proposed by the council of ministers and approved by His Majesty the King are published in the Official Gazette. Policies, rules, regulations, and directions are brought through the attention of school administration and directors by directives from the ministry, supplemented by personal contact through Ministry inspection of schools.

Freedom to establish non-state schools

Private education is officially encouraged in Saudi Arabia (World Education Services, 2004). Private institutions exist at all levels and receive governmental funding and administrative support. Licenses for opening private institutions are granted only to Saudi citizens, and private schools have no right to grant degrees at any stage of education. However, state supervision of private schools ensures a level equal to that of governmental schools.

The General Department for Private Education at the Ministry of Education supervises private schools for boys and private schools for girls, and government provides private schools with free textbooks and an annual financial aid (Wikipedia, 2010). Government also appoints and pays for a qualified director in every private school.

The Saudi government, in addition, permits the participation of reputable foreign private education providers, simultaneously increasing competition and capacity in the sector. For example, the College of Business Administration in Jeddah is British-based and is growing rapidly. In addition, the government is updating the rules and requirements governing private education institutes, in particular those pertaining to co-education and curricular flexibility, and applying them consistently throughout the private education sector.

Homeschooling

Education in Saudi Arabia is provided by the government (Al Rawaf and Simmons 1991; Ministry of Education, 2008; Oliver, 1987). However, there is little data on homeschooling in Saudi Arabia. If any, homeschooling is purported to be limited mainly to foreigners such as American expatriates. This is probably due to state control in education in the country where the government supplies most of the resources for education at the various levels. The concept of homeschooling is new to the Saudi educational arena, the families in the country might not be willing to home school or even lack the needed qualifications due to the recent introduction of modern education.

School choice not limited by family income

Education in Saudi Arabia is provided by the government, free of charge, to all Saudis and children of Arabic-speaking residents who want it, from kindergarten up to and including secondary school (Al Rawaf and Simmons 1991, p.287). According to the World Bank database, public spending on education is 6.8 percent of GDP, and public spending on education as percentage of government expenditure is 27.6 percent in 2004 (Wikipedia, 2010). Education spending as a proportion of overall spending tripled from 1970 to 2000 and neither economic growth nor the price of oil had much impact on this trend in Saudi Arabia. The majority of the Saudi people send their children to public schools in their neighborhoods. This is the custom. However, those who can afford the expense and the international community send their children to well-performing private or international schools.

School distinctiveness protected by law and policy

Distinctiveness

There is also a lack of adequate information on school distinctiveness as protected by law and policy, particularly in English. However, it is stated that there are a few private schools, segregated by gender, but their curricula and general rules are supervised by government agencies to ensure uniformity (Rugh 2002, p. 45). Private school directors can only add to the government approved curriculum, not subtract from it. Private education is to be considered one of the elements supporting governmental education at all education levels. The General Department for Private Education at the Ministry of Education supervises private schools for boys and private schools for girls.

Decisions about admitting pupils

Students go to school in their neighborhoods. One should be a resident to go to a public school in the neighborhood. In addition, schools are segregated by gender. Apart from these, people with higher income send their children to private or international schools anywhere. International schools are more expensive than other private schools.

Decisions about staff

Schools in Saudi Arabia are required mainly to rely upon formal qualifications such as university degrees or success on examinations. Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission (1991, p. 58) stated that secondary school graduates who earn two-year junior college degrees will be qualified to become teachers' assistants. Four-year Bachelor of Arts degrees are now required for new teachers in all levels of education. Teachers with

the older, lower-level training certificates can update their knowledge and qualifications in special programs offered at two teacher training centers. In this regard, while the proportion of non-Saudi teachers, who mainly come from neighboring countries, has been declining, the government is greatly concerned about the continuing large numbers of non-Saudi teachers (Oliver, 1987, pp. 7-8). Moreover, the Ministry of Education selects and assigns teachers only to public schools, while it assigns directors to most private schools. The teachers in private and international schools are selected by the administration of their schools.

Accountability for school quality

The Saudi education system is centralized, resulting in accountability to the government (Oliver, 1987, p.5). Two agencies—the Ministry of Education and the General Presidency of Girls Education –direct almost all of the general elementary, intermediate, and secondary schools in Saudi Arabia, accounting for 93% of the students enrolled at these levels. The curriculum, textbooks, teacher qualifications and assignments, and general supervision in these schools are the same for both agencies, and also apply to private schools and those directed by other government agencies. State supervision of private schools ensures a level equal to that of governmental schools. All curriculum changes result from the actions of two national committees—the Committee of Educational Policies and the Supreme Committee of Educational Policies. Universities operate semi- autonomously under the Ministry of Higher Education except from Islamic University, which is under the Council of Ministers.

Teaching of values

The government prescribes what sorts of values are taught in state schools and in private schools. Private schools are allowed to add to the curriculum not subtract from it. Generally, the objectives of Saudi educational policy are to ensure that education becomes more efficient, to meet the religious, economic and social needs of the country and to eradicate illiteracy among Saudi adults (Ministry of education 2008). In short, educational policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia emanates from Islam, which is the state belief, worship, ethics, law, and life integrated system.

The merging of religious and civic duty, combined with the infusion of Islamic sensibilities into secular pursuits, forms the backbone of the modern educational system in Saudi Arabia. In addition, education, at all its stages, is designed as an unchangeable part of the state's general development plan. Arabic and Islamic culture shape many principles of Saudi education and illustrate the extent to which religious values are incorporated into public policy (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991, p.7). Specific principles of education that are inspired by Islamic mores include the following. Education should:

- Strengthen faith in God and Islam, and in Mohammed as God's prophet and envoy.
- Foster a holistic Islamic concept of the universe, man and life in which the laws of God enable each creature to fulfill its duty.
- Emphasize that life on earth is a stage of work and production during which a Muslim invests his or her abilities with full faith in eternal life in the other world. Today is work without judgment and tomorrow is judgment without work.
- Teach that the message of Mohammed ensures happiness to man and rescues humanity from corruption and misery.
- Instill the Islamic ideal of a humane, prudent and constructive civilization that is guided by Mohammed's message to realize glory on earth and happiness in the other world.
- Engender faith in human dignity as decreed in the holy Qur'an and that each Muslim is entrusted with the task of fulfilling God's wishes on earth.
- Reinforce that it is an Islamic duty for every individual to seek an education and the state's duty to provide educational resources.
- Incorporate religious education as a basic element in all branches of primary, intermediate and secondary stages of education. Maintain Islamic culture as a basic course in all years of higher education.
- Use an Islamic orientation to judge the theories and applications of science and knowledge in all forms, curricula, writing and teaching so that this knowledge is in harmony with Islamic thinking.
- Foster absolute faith in the fundamentals of the Islamic nation and its unity regardless of race, color and geographical distance.
- Encourage the careful study of national history, the heritage of the Islamic religion and the lives of our ancestors.
- Promote Islamic solidarity and strengthen cooperation among Islamic peoples in order to protect them from all dangers.
- Respect the general rights guaranteed by Islam in order to maintain law and order, achieve stability for the Muslim community, religion, soul, family, honor, mind and property.
- Encourage social solidarity among members of the Muslim community through cooperation, love fraternity and placing the public good over private interests.

- Teach that God has bestowed a special character on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:
a) as the guardian of Islam's sacred places; b) as the defender of the land in which the prophet Mohammed received his inspiration; c) in its adoption of Islam as religion, law, constitution and way of life; and d) I its responsibility to spread Islam throughout the world.
- Teach that to preach Islam throughout the world, with prudence and persuasion, is the duty of the state and its citizens.
- Encourage strength in its most sublime forms—strength of faith, character and body—because a strong Muslim is closer to God's heart.

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