Social Engineering in the UAE

Efforts in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to re-mold the citizenry are yielding unintended results, Dr. Calvert Jones argued at a recent CSIS Middle East Program roundtable. Through her field research in the UAE, Jones found that experimental Emirati school curricula intended to produce more globalized, engaged, and self-sufficient citizens are producing graduates who are prouder and more patriotic, but also ones who feel more entitled to state support. Jones, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, College Park’s Department of Government and Politics, spoke at a CSIS roundtable on “Social Engineering in the UAE” on May 17, 2018.

Building Citizens

As in many other Gulf states, the overwhelming bulk of the national labor force in the UAE works for the government. Oil wealth has long allowed UAE leaders to accommodate this reality, and just under 90 percent of working Emirati citizens are employed in the public sector. Government patronage is the key economic driver in much of the UAE.

Because the Emirati population is growing and oil’s primacy as a fuel is diminishing, Emirati leaders are seeking to transition to a more diverse, post-petroleum economy. For many years, and with increasing urgency, they have been seeking to move beyond a traditional, patronage-based economy and create a “modern” country with a vibrant private sector connected to global markets.

To meet this challenge in rentier states, external observers often advocate supply-side structural reforms. These reforms diminish the availability of public sector employment, cutting salaries and positions, and force job seekers into the private sector. Jones remarked that such reforms can be economically painful for citizens and politically risky for leaders, whose legitimacy rests on their ability to provide for the public.

The Gulf Roundtable Series

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable Series in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen.

The roundtable regularly assembles a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the strategic importance of Gulf energy, changing Gulf relations with Asia, human capital development, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. The Gulf Roundtable series is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates.
UAE leaders have embarked on a creative strategy of social engineering intended to reduce the demand for public sector employment. Rather than kicking citizens off the payroll, they hope to raise a new generation of Emiratis who think differently about their country and their stake in its future. The new Emirati model of citizen-building shares the methods of traditional authoritarian social engineering, but it differs in substance. Through state-sponsored symbolism, messaging, and education reform, UAE leaders seek to cultivate globalization-ready citizens who are entrepreneurial and devoted to their nation—what Jones called “bourgeois citizens.”

Schools play an important role in this effort. In the last decade, a series of education reforms have sought to reduce rote learning, promote critical thinking, and encourage creativity through more student-centered schools. Reduced emphasis on religious instruction has made room for more robust science, math, reading, and English-language learning. Reforms have also attempted to shape students’ conceptions of citizenship.

In her research, Jones assessed the leadership’s goals as well as mid-course results of an early set of reforms. She did rigorous survey research that compared the attitudes of students from traditional and reformed schools across a variety of areas.

ENTITLED PATRIOTS

One focus of the UAE’s campaign is on the economic dimensions of citizenship. Leaders hope to see youth embrace entrepreneurship or private sector employment not merely as a livelihood, but also as a means to self-fulfillment and a way of contributing to their nation. Contrary to the program’s intentions, however, Jones found that students who studied in reformed schools actually emerged more supportive of citizens’ right to public sector employment and more averse to the risks involved in starting a business. Although her study focused on boys’ schools, Jones’s fieldwork suggested that female students’ work ethic was higher than their male counterparts, yet also indicated that girls believed even more strongly in citizens’ entitlement to government jobs.

Nationalism is another key part of the social-engineering campaign. Leaders seek to cultivate citizens’ love of country as a motivator for personal sacrifice and involvement in driving the economy forward. Ruling elites are central to this effort, portraying themselves as benevolent parental figures equipping citizens with the skills they need to succeed and encouraging youth to believe more in themselves and their nation. In the education sector, nationalism is promoted through UAE rulers’ visits, words of praise and congratulations extended to students, and the delivery of state-of-the-art equipment to reformed schools. The campaign has been successful in producing a proud generation of Emirati citizens, Jones remarked.

However, this love of country does not translate into economic motivation. Rather than fueling entrepreneurial ambition, students interpret their leaders’ attention and praise as a sign of elite status. Young Emiratis who have studied under reformed curricula come out with both with higher risk-aversity and higher expectation of reward. Jones concluded that some nationalist-tinged praise, especially at an early age, may actually increase a sense of entitlement and lessen self-sacrifice—leading to a phenomenon she terms “paradoxical” or “entitled” patriotism.

Education reforms did not have an overtly political component, although they did seek to increase feelings of respect and tolerance. The reformed curricula diminished students’ support for universal political rights, but they heightened students’ desire to take part personally in the country’s decision-making process. Jones said her research also suggests that the leadership was successful in cultivating tolerance and civic-mindedness, particularly youths’ interest in volunteerism.

LOOKING BEYOND THE UAE

Lessons learned from the UAE’s experience in social engineering have implications beyond the seven emirates. Building engaged citizens is an important goal for any state in an increasingly demanding, technologically-intensive, and competitive global economy, Jones contended. But this engagement reaches beyond the economic dimension of citizenship, to include national loyalty and cosmopolitanism, as well as civic consciousness and tolerance.

While concerns about Westernization and neo-imperialism are legitimate, the UAE also supports the notion that pro-globalization social engineering need not erode national and cultural identity. But whereas nationalism is typically understood as a driver of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the community, the Emirati experience suggests that not all nationalisms are equally motivating.