Mishal Husain, one of the BBC’s best-known presenters, delivered a CIRS Focused Discussion in which she talked about how journalists navigate through, and respond to, ever-changing news environments, particularly during seismic world events such as the Arab uprisings and the recent spectacle of the US presidential election. Relaying her journalism experience, spanning over two decades in the field, she said: “I am aware, and feel the privilege of the job I do, not just the places I go to, but the moments in time and, certainly, the access to both the powerful and the powerless.”

Husain reflected on how the UK’s recent EU referendum was reported, highlighting the duty of the BBC and other broadcasters to ensure due impartiality in political coverage, the controversy about “fake news” in the wake of Donald Trump’s election victory, and her concerns about hearing “mainstream media” employed as a term of abuse.

Many people have become progressively dismissive of traditional, established news channels that reach a mass audience, and there is a growing environment in which people are seeking to reinforce their own views, rather than opening up to a culture of informed debate. Husain noted that “the debate about fake news is very compelling at the moment, but the influence of stories that are misleading at best will also require careful scrutiny.” Ultimately, she noted, all this is leading to the increasing circulation of misinformation, the dismissal of facts, and the erosion of truth.

As a final thought, Husain said there is a personal responsibility for people to examine the facts and to weigh the evidence. “I am deeply concerned today about the echo chamber, but also what I see as the lack of a critical thinking mindset, which is now even being identified as a bulwark against radicalization,” she stated. Husain talked about the importance of a wide range of news sources, particularly for minority communities, and an openness to explore other opinions and perspectives. “Our capacity for citizenship will not improve unless these personal skills are developed,” she concluded.
Greetings from Doha.

This academic year, CIRS has been busy initiating, as well as completing, a number of research initiatives. In addition, we have produced several academic publications in the form of books, papers, and reports, and have hosted a series of outreach programs, inviting members of the Qatar community and beyond, to engage with experts on the Gulf and Middle East region.

This spring, we engaged in a number of ongoing initiatives, including a series of working groups where scholars met on the following topics: “Leading the Faithful: The Role of Religious Authorities in the Middle East,” “Highly Skilled Migrants: The Gulf and Global Perspectives,” “Middle Power Politics in the Middle East;” and “Sports, Society, and the State in the Middle East,” among others. These intensive research initiatives are designed using empirically-grounded, theoretically-informed research where the goal is to fill in existing gaps in the literature and to contribute original knowledge to the field.

CIRS recently published a special issue of The Muslim World, a dedicated forum for engaging with research on the Muslim world. Titled “The State of Middle Eastern Youth,” the issue is edited by CIRS Research Analyst, Islam Hassan, and Paul Dyer, formerly with Silatech. We have also produced several new books, including Transitional Justice in the Middle East and North Africa; Inside the Islamic Republic: Social Change in Post-Khomeini Iran; and Target Markets: International Terrorism Meets Global Capitalism in the Mall, written by Suzi Mirgani, Managing Editor at CIRS. For more information on all recent CIRS publications, please refer to page three of this newsletter. As always, our in-house publications can be downloaded for free from the CIRS website.

This edition of the newsletter contains detailed information about each CIRS activity and research initiative conducted over the past few months, as well as articles highlighting recent lectures and events. We warmly welcome feedback from our readership, whether it is through Facebook, Twitter, or by e-mail. I, and the rest of the CIRS team, look forward to hearing from you and seeing you at our upcoming lectures. We invite our readers to follow CIRS news and activities by logging on to the CIRS website at: http://cirs.georgetown.edu.

Sincerely,

Mehran Kamrava
Professor at Georgetown University in Qatar
Director of the Center for International and Regional Studies
Since 1989, the internal dynamics of change in Iran, rooted in a panoply of socioeconomic, cultural, institutional, demographic, and behavioral factors, have led to a noticeable transition in both societal and governmental structures of power, as well as the way in which many Iranians have come to deal with the changing conditions of their society. This is all exacerbated by the global trend of communication and information expansion, as Iran has increasingly become the site of burgeoning demands for women’s rights, individual freedoms, and festering tensions and conflicts over cultural politics. These realities have rendered Iran a country of unprecedented—and at times paradoxical—changes. This book explains how and why.

The Muslim World, CIRS Special Issue: The State of Middle Eastern Youth
Edited by Islam Hassan and Paul Dyer, Vol. 107, no. 1, 2017

This special issue studies the state of Middle Eastern youth, focusing on the ways in which their experiences continue to shape their worldviews and their priorities. This study enhances an understanding of the lives of young people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and examines the social, economic, and political challenges they contend with; the ways in which they manage and respond to their environments; and the novel methods of mobilization and its regeneration of a new consciousness. The papers making up this special issue are the results of a research initiative launched by CIRS in collaboration with Silatech—an organization that connects youth to employment opportunities—to explore the ways in which youth manage and respond to various socioeconomic and political constraints across the region.

Transitional Justice in the Middle East and North Africa
Chandra Sriram, ed. Oxford University Press/Hurst, 2016

This volume is the result of a CIRS research initiative that examines the unfolding experience of transitional justice across the Middle East in the post-uprising era. This work is the first to look at this process and brings together leading experts in the fields of human rights and transitional justice, and in the history, politics and justice systems of countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Bahrain, and Morocco. While these countries have diverse histories, political institutions, and experiences with accountability, most have experienced non-transition, stalled transition, or political manipulation of transitional justice measures, highlighting the limits of such mechanisms.

Target Markets: International Terrorism Meets Global Capitalism in the Mall
Suzi Mirgani, Transcript Press, 2017

With widespread availability and access to information and communication technologies, terrorist attacks against urban commercial enterprises have become highly publicized through corporate news media networks and personal social media platforms, affecting people with a heightened fear of public spaces. This book explores the points of convergence between corporate capitalist and terrorist practice. Assessing an increase in the number of terrorist attacks directed at commercial entities in urban areas, with an emphasis on the shopping mall in general and Nairobi’s Westgate Mall in particular, Suzi Mirgani offers a disturbing perspective on the spaces where the most powerful forces of contemporary culture—the most mainstream and the most extreme—meet on common ground.

Inside the Islamic Republic: Social Change in Post-Khomeini Iran

Since 1989, the internal dynamics of change in Iran, rooted in a panoply of socioeconomic, cultural, institutional, demographic, and behavioral factors, have led to a noticeable transition in both societal and governmental structures of power, as well as the way in which many Iranians have come to deal with the changing conditions of their society. This is all exacerbated by the global trend of communication and information expansion, as Iran has increasingly become the site of burgeoning demands for women’s rights, individual freedoms, and festering tensions and conflicts over cultural politics. These realities have rendered Iran a country of unprecedented—and at times paradoxical—changes. This book explains how and why.
In a lecture on November 23, 2016, Anatol Lieven, Professor of International Politics at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, spoke about the 2016 US elections within the broad context of the United States Constitution. Today, many Americans consider the Constitution “sacred,” and would reject even the smallest changes to it, even though it has undergone twenty-seven successful amendments over its history. This passionate attachment comes from the Constitution’s central importance to American civic nationalism and national identity, and its success in framing the United States as it grew to become the most powerful country on earth.

This is not really a problem if a system delivers good government and basic, consensual civic peace, however, Lieven said: “I fear that the US Constitution is, as it presently exists, less and less able to do this.” As things stand today, “the Constitution is beginning to work massively in favor of one section of the American population and American politics, namely white conservatives, who are not anxious to give up the advantages that this system gives them,” he said.

Other Western democracies have made changes to their constitutions over the years, but systems that have been as successful as that of the USA over a long period will find it more difficult to change. But however successful it may have been in the past, “A system which is not capable of even limited and pragmatic change may be in serious trouble,” Lieven cautioned. Because of the way that US presidential elections work, and because of the institution of the US Electoral College, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, but Donald Trump won the election because he secured the Electoral College votes. The same thing happened with Al Gore and George Bush in 2000.

“As far as I know, the United States is the only presidential democracy in the world that operates in this way,” he said.

According to Lieven, the US presidential election campaign has essentially been reduced to fifteen states—those needed to win the Electoral College, and the other thirty-five states are ignored to a considerable degree. This has created a somewhat odd image of US democracy in the world. He asked, “Is the United States, in fact, a democracy? Well, the obvious answer is no, of course it isn’t, because it wasn’t intended to be.” The founders were notoriously suspicious of democracy, which they associated with the threat of anarchy and mob rule leading to tyranny, he explained. They put barriers against democracy into the Constitution, and it was almost forty years later that the US actually became a more or less democratic country in the (then) sense of a country where all adult white males had the vote.

“Is the United States, in fact, a democracy? Well, the obvious answer is no, of course it isn’t, because it wasn’t intended to be.”

The founders’ intention was to create a system that would prevent tyranny while providing reasonably good, though very limited government. “It was, above all, to create a system that would last, that would create institutions that could mediate and reconcile different interests,” among thirteen very different states, Lieven said. This balanced state powers against those of the central government. The battles of states’ rights remain critically important to this day, especially when it comes to racial and cultural issues, Lieven said. This is what led to the secession of the South before the Civil War and the battles over states’ rights in the 1940s–1960s, as the white South fought to retain racial segregation and discrimination.

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Azmi Bishara, General Director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, delivered a CIRS Monthly Dialogue lecture on November 28, 2016. While the lecture centered on the state of democracy in the Arab world in the wake of the uprisings, he noted that some of the concerns could be equally applied to the failure of liberalism in the West, and the rise of increasingly right-wing tendencies.

Set against a background of brutality of old regimes and the oppression of civil protests, Bishara gave four broad explanations for why this round of democratic transition has failed in the Arab world. The first of these was that Arab political elites of both the opposition and the ruling factions could not come to any compromises or agree on shared settlements in the wake of the Arab uprisings. This, he said, was because “the Arab political elite, had no democratic culture.” Democratic cultures take time to flourish in society in general, and are learned over many years through various aspects of a nation’s foundational systems, including its educational system, the institution of which is the responsibility of political elites in the transitional phase.

To this effect, Bishara argued that there is no such thing as a “democratic revolution,” since “democracy happens afterwards... through reform, not through revolutions. This includes the French Revolution. It did not lead to democracy at the beginning; it needed a long process of reform to reach democracy at the end,” he said. It is a historical norm that after mass societal and political changes, opposing political elites enter into rounds of negotiation regarding the future direction of the country. This did not happen in the post-Arab uprisings. He argued that “the young people who went out to the streets, protesting torture, humiliation, and physical abuse of human beings, thought that they actually achieved or finished the job when Mr. Mubarak and Mr. Zine El-Abidine resigned or abdicated.” In earnest, the protestors delivered their hard-won changes to the political elites in order to transform the new raw political environment into actionable, viable reforms, but no such restructuring took place.

“Democracy happens afterwards ... through reform, not through revolutions.”

The second reason for why democracy did not take root in the region is because of the failure to find a balance between democracy and liberalism—something that was achieved only relatively recently in Western nations in the post-World War II period. Today, we understand that “democracy in itself is not only majority rule; it is not only a question of the ballots; and it is not only a question of free elections,” Bishara argued. “Now when we speak of principles of democracy that should be respected by the majority, we actually mean liberal rights,” he said. These are the meta-constitutional principles that have not been taken to heart by Arab political movements.

Even as traditionally conservative parties finally began to accept democracy in the shape of ballots and elections, they did not respect or believe in the related liberal principles. While it is understood that the more radical Islamic movements, like the Islamic State, openly reject democracy in general, in the post–Arab uprisings, “even the mainstream Islamic movements who accept democracy as majority rule underestimated how important civil liberties are for the so-called new Arab middle class, without which you cannot build anything,” and without which the urban centers will be lost—as was witnessed in Egypt when the Muslim Brotherhood took control.

Bishara’s third reason for the failure of democracy is due to the ways in which modern Arab regimes are engaging in the divisive and dangerous politicization—and polarization—of the multiethnic, multicultural, and sectarian social structures of their societies, especially in the countries of the Levant. Recently, there have been concerted attempts “to mobilize political loyalties to nondemocratic ruling regimes by using subnational affiliations, repoliticized sects, identities, ethnicities, tribes,” which was not the case in the past, he said. This policy of so-called secular regimes elicited feelings of sectarian discrimination and confessional reaction among the people.

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Urbanists, governance experts, and climate change specialists gathered in Doha for a two-day working group meeting on January 10-11, 2017 that was co-hosted by the Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas at Austin and CIRS. The meeting was designed to facilitate discussions on climate change vulnerability and governance in coastal cities of South Asia.

Topics debated in the workshop included the nature and definition of various understandings of climate vulnerability; the role that coastal geographies and ecologies play in exacerbating climate vulnerability; the impacts of climate change on urban settlement and migration; and the governance challenges faced by cities as they attempt (or in some cases do not attempt) to address these issues. The conversation was specifically designed to generate comparative discussion across coastal cities in the region with particular attention paid to coastal mega-cities of the region including Chennai, Dhaka, Karachi, Kolkata, and Mumbai.

Key policy-relevant questions considered included:

- How should we understand climate-related vulnerability in South Asia's changing urban context?
- How should we think about governance vulnerabilities as we contemplate climate hazards?
- How will climate change transform the ways that coastal cities encounter their physical and governance environments?
- How will the anticipated phenomenon of mass displacement and migration challenge our accepted understandings of sovereignty and the protection missions of the state, the city, and the community?
- How does and should our understanding of the science of climate change affect the ways policy is developed across borders and governance systems?

The working group meeting was the latest in an ongoing series of conversations on this topic organized by Dr. Paula Newberg as part of the Strauss Center’s research initiative on Complex Emergencies and Political Stability in Asia. The research program explores the diverse forces that contribute to climate-related disaster vulnerability and complex emergencies in Asia; the implications of such events for local and regional security; and how investments in preparedness can minimize these impacts and build resilience. CEPSA is a multi-year initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Defense’s Minerva Initiative, a university based, social science research program focused on areas of strategic importance to national security policy.
Student enrollment in higher education institutions has rapidly increased in most Middle Eastern countries in recent years. Governments have shown a strong commitment to higher education, and there has been broad support from politicians and citizens for establishing more universities and increasing access to higher education. However, in recent years, the supply of university graduates in many fields of education has exceeded the labor market demand and the unemployment rate among university graduates has increased. So far this high unemployment rate has not led to a reduction in student enrollment. Instead, some Middle Eastern countries have fallen into an “over-education trap,” according to Nader Habibi, Professor of Economics and Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, during a CIRS Focused Discussion on February 19, 2017.

The over-education trap, as defined by Habibi, includes the following process: university graduates who cannot find employment in their university majors will eventually accept low-skilled and semi-skilled jobs that do not require a university degree. In doing so they reduce the employment opportunities for high school graduates, who would have traditionally been employed for these jobs. Consequently, high-school graduates face higher unemployment rates (crowded out by university graduates), and many will conclude that their only option for avoiding unemployment is a university education.

Habibi argued that there must be a balance between quality and quantity of education in the region. “Getting a degree in physics and then getting a job in chemistry or another job that requires a university degree is not big a waste of resources; you’re still a university graduate working in some other field,” Habibi said. “But if you are a university graduate and you are working in a field that does not really need the skills of a university education then you have to think about the resources you (and the government) have devoted to your education.”

Habibi began his research on conditions of higher education in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey four years ago. Along with local research partners in these countries, he conducted research on the earnings of university graduates, examined the motivations behind why individuals choose to get degrees, interviewed policymakers, and studied higher-education planning patterns.

There is strong cultural demand for higher education everywhere, but this was not the case forty or fifty years ago, he explained. “In 1976, it was unheard of for university graduates to be unemployed in Iran, but in 2011 the unemployment rate for university graduates was nineteen percent.” Habibi reported that in many MENA countries today, the unemployment rate for people with university degrees is higher than for high school graduates.

In the past two decades, because of the political acceptance of privatization of higher education, policymakers have been able to expand higher education without expanding the government expenditure by the same proportion. Therefore, in a way, the fiscal burden of expansion has been reduced through privatization. “In these countries, enrollment has increased, but the burden of education on government has not increased,” Habibi said. Politicians did not foresee that increasing enrollment would become a massive burden. “The cost of education is to a large extent a burden on the entire society,” he said, “so we should justify the return to education not just for the individual but for the entire society, by taking into account the massive government investment in tertiary education.”

A common feature among Middle Eastern countries is that governments take an active role in educational planning. This is not the case in Europe and the United States, where a large number of universities are private, and governments do not really have much control over admission and enrollment policies. He said there are two primary justifications for governments expanding educational opportunities in higher education, economic justification (labor market demand for university skills) and social demand.

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MIDDLE POWER POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

On January 15-16, 2017, the Center for International and Regional Studies held a working group under its research initiative on “Middle Power Politics in the Middle East.” Over two days, participants identified key gaps in the literature on the international relations of the Middle East through the lens of middle power theory. Participants led discussions on related subtopics, including: Middle Eastern middle powers and the international system, middle powers and the 2011 Arab uprisings, domestic politics, middle powers’ cooperation and competition, humanitarian diplomacy, norm entrepreneurship, and conflict resolution and mediation.

The 2011 Arab uprisings have been an evolving period of significance in the Middle East. While increasing domestic instability in some of the traditionally strong states led to a retraction in their capacity in international and regional affairs, smaller states were suddenly given an opening for more prominent engagement. It remains to be seen whether these smaller states’ regional and international status-seeking endeavors are of a durable, sustainable nature.

There is ambiguity in the scholarly literature in providing an exact definition for middle power states and also which states might qualify for middle power status within the context of the Middle East. The first topic discussed revolved around the characteristics for determining whether a state can claim middle power status. These characteristics include, among others, states’ relative hard-power capabilities, their capacity to exert influence over regional events, their financial resources, their institutional strength and bureaucratic capabilities, and their relative autonomy. Participants also discussed common foreign policy features among Middle Eastern middle powers. These states tend to impact their immediate sphere, are regional balancers, have the capacity to bargain with super powers and great powers, establish alliances with lesser powers, and generally do not engage in warfare.

Another issue is the limitations in middle power theory as to how it only focuses on the international hierarchal structure of power, and disregards the multiple hierarchal sub-structures within the international order. In other words, there are middle powers that pursue this role on the international level, and others who pursue it only within their respective regions. This raises a number of questions: Should the Middle East be defined based on exceptionalism, and thus needs a new definition of middle powers? Can a middle power be a non-democratic government, and not a good global citizen, such as in the Egyptian and Saudi cases? And do middle powers have to share similar pillars of foreign policy agendas? In other words, is the concept of middle power theoretically so diverse that one, for example, cannot compare Iran to Australia as middle powers?

Since status is a self-proclamation met with international recognition, the interactions of Middle Eastern middle powers with extra-regional powers; the expectations of global powers from middle powers in the region; and Middle Eastern middle powers’ expectations from other global middle powers; are all issues worth in-depth examination. Moreover, the perceptions of middle powers in the Middle East with regards to international options, especially with the rise of China; Russia being a potential partner; and the South-South relations remain profoundly understudied. When discussing how the Arab uprisings reconfigured the power relations of the Middle East, it is evident that domestic dynamics impact foreign policy agendas. The post 2011 dynamics force us to reconsider traditionally understood conceptions of power, state, and sovereignty. The transnational impact of the Arab uprisings on middle powers in the region, in terms of political ideologies and migration patterns, have led to re-alignments of alliances.

Continued on page 14
CIRS held its second working group under the research initiative on “Leading the Faithful: The Rule of Religious Authorities in the Middle East” on March 12-13, 2017. Working group participants presented draft papers investigating the dynamics, the position of, and the role played by religious leaders of assorted religious communities present in the Middle East. Some papers provided nuanced historical depth when tracing the roles of religious leaders, and others addressed the role of religious leadership in more recent times, particularly in the wake of increasing confessional and sectarian civil conflict seen in the wars in Iraq and Syria. The papers together provide an examination of the following areas: the role of Sunni authority from a historical perspective; the evolution of the marja’ and Shi’i religious leadership in the Middle East; the role of Sufi religious leaders and orders in the Middle East today; the evolution of leadership and authority over the hajj; the conditions of the Alawite community and the role of the Alawi Sheikhs in Syria in the current context; and case studies on the religious leadership of the Mandaean, the Yezidi, and the Shabak religious communities.

Professor Tamara Sonn opened the discussion with a paper on the topic, “Who Speaks for the Umma? Sunni Authority and Religious Leadership in the Contemporary Middle East.” Sonn suggested that there is no single source of Sunni religious leadership in the contemporary Middle East. Due to political and demographic changes over the past century, Sunni religious leadership is in a state of transition. Traditional nodes of religious authority have been called into question, and are themselves evolving. As well, non-traditional sources of authority are emerging and, in some cases, have become sufficiently institutionalized to supplant traditional authorities. She briefly described traditional sources of religious authority in Sunni Islam and provided an overview of political and demographic developments that called traditional authorities into question. Sonn surveyed representative examples of both reformed traditional authorities and emerging non-traditional religious leaders in the Sunni Middle East. Finally, she concluded with some observations about long-term trends in Sunni authority and religious leadership in general.

Sajjad Rizvi presented his paper on Shi’i leadership and the making of a marja’, focusing on the role of Sistani and Shi’i religious authority in the Twitter age. He considers the question of how one becomes a marja’, particularly in reference to the authority of that marja’. He examines the Sistani and the shift and development of the marja’ in the form of the “Sistani model” in the age of social media. Rizvi argues that globalization has both increased the power and reach of the maraji; but yet, ironically, made their significance more local. The increasing consensus of the political role of the maraji’ is clear in Qum, Najaf, and beyond. He claims that the recent developments in Iraq have shown that the theory of the authority of the jurist (wilayah al-faqih) is no longer just Iranian, nor does the support for it signal a disloyal support for the Iranian state and its jurisdiction. What is properly Iranian and Iraqi in the contemporary world cannot be so easily compartmentalized; this further complicates the question of the role of “Iran” in Iraq. A study of the maraji’ demonstrates that there is more than one conception of marja’iyya and of the hawza, as well as multiple claimants and potential centers of power for the maraji’. In other words, that the marja’iyya is traditional and local as well as dynamic and transnational, quietist and conservative, as well as politically engaged and reforming.

Mark Sedgwick examines Sufi religious leaders and orders in the Middle East today. He studies the basis and nature of the primarily esoteric, person-centered authority of the Sufi shaykh in the context of the tariqa (Sufi Order), and Sufi doctrine. Sedgwick raises the point about the inverse relationship between the power

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The Regional Humanitarian Crisis

Essa Al-Mannai, Executive Director of ROTA, delivered the talk, “The Regional Humanitarian Crisis: How ROTA is Mobilizing Resources to Tackle the Refugee Crisis through Education,” at the Center for International and Regional Studies on February 7, 2017. Reach Out To Asia is a Qatar-based non-profit organization that works to ensure that people affected by crisis across Asia and the Middle East have continuous access to relevant and high-quality primary and secondary education. Since its inception in 2005, ROTA has had a vision of providing education for children and youth to discover their potential to become full, responsible citizens building their communities and their futures. Today, ROTA has education and development projects in thirteen countries and it has a major strategic initiative to build local capacity and community service in Qatar.

Al-Mannai shared these grim figures about the status of refugees today:

- Currently, there are twenty-one million refugees in the world.
- About fifty percent of the world’s refugee population is children.
- On average, a refugee will live away from home for seventeen years.
- There are sixty-five million forcibly-displaced people worldwide. This number is comprised primarily of internally-displaced people who do not have any country or state that would acknowledge their citizenship, and the aforementioned twenty-one million refugees. Tragically, against these disheartening numbers, Al-Mannai reported that only 107,000 refugees were resettled in 2015. He cautioned of the danger of just looking at the magnitude of these problems in terms of the numbers, however. “When we talk about refugees, we are talking about humans with ambitions. People who have hopes and the right to fulfill life dreams,” he said.

ROTA upholds education as the top priority in humanitarian crises because children are the most marginalized and most vulnerable. Providing access to education in safe, nurturing environments can enable children to develop critical lifelong skills. Al-Mannai explained that it is essential for children in emergency situations to have a sense of normalcy, to make friendships, build self-confidence, acquire knowledge, and have a chance to become something in the future. Furthermore, he said, “The simple fact is that illiteracy is isolation, and isolation can lead to destructive tendencies towards the self and towards others.”

What benefits does the world get by educating refugees? “It’s our moral obligation as humans to identify and respect the human mind through fulfilling its desire to learn, to acquire knowledge, to ask questions, to debate, and ultimately to create something,” said Al-Mannai. It is a human need for everyone, regardless of status or where you are from, and, he said, “without education this right is denied.”

Another benefit of educating refugees is the huge return on investment for a country that has experienced a crisis, such as the civil war in Syria. Eventually, there will need to be resettlement and rebuilding. “Do you want to rebuild a country with engineers and doctors or people who are illiterate?” Al-Mannai asked, “The benefits of education are self-evident.” He reported that, according to a 2016 World Bank report, education is an investment where, overall, each year of schooling will raise individual earnings by ten percent; bringing better results than almost any other form of investment. However, of all the international aid that goes for emergencies, only 1.4 percent goes to education.

The Syrian refugee crisis rose from 3.7 million in 2015 to 4.8 million in 2016. Schools were severely in need, with a broken-down infrastructure and with limited teacher capacity and access to materials. ROTA’s basic approach to this
dire situation was to increase teacher capacity and offer non-formal education, because schools simply could not meet the great needs of the refugee populations. “Education goes beyond the book, the teacher, and homework,” Al-Mannai said. Non-formal education can provide a support system to children and youth and offer a positive environment with psychosocial support, and other assistance. ROTA does not just build schools, it takes a holistic approach because, he explained, “education is a multi-party process that engages the community, the government, ministries of education, the school directorate, the parents, and even the teachers and the school administration.”

Al-Mannai said a shift is occurring in the global agenda for international humanitarian work and development. In the year 2000, leaders from 189 countries gathered at the United Nations and approved eight Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Progress was achieved in a number of those goals, but the new target is Sustainable Development Goals. The big lesson learned from the international community, according to Al Mannai, is that “Giving is not enough. We have to give, but we also have to build local capacity.”

Global development goals are moving from quantity measures towards quality. According to Al-Mannai, the focus in the past was on the most needy, poorest countries; now there is recognition that everyone must be included to achieve targets. The previous approach was top-down, donor to beneficiary; now it is bottom-up, and developing capacity is the new goal. Al-Mannai said the new understanding is that top-down will never work, because the needy will continue to come back and ask for more. Teaching people to build their capacities, systems, and governance are the new global directions. The current draft of the Sustainable Development Goals has seventeen goals, and include peace, stability, and human rights.

ROTA is building local capacity in Qatar through youth engagement, community service, and global citizenship. ROTA has created various platforms for youth to become active locally and internationally, and to serve as representatives of Qatar in the region. To date, over one-thousand youth have been trained by ROTA. There are currently eighteen Qatari-based youth clubs, each with its own unique vision and mission. Some international platforms that Qatari youth have participated in include the UN General Assembly and the UN World Humanitarian Summit, and ROTA hosted the Global Youth Consultation in 2015, which shapes youth engagement in humanitarian work.

ROTA is a partnership-led initiative, working with organizations in other countries, because Al-Mannai said, “One solution will not fit all, and no one organization has all the solutions.” There are many humanitarian and aid organizations, each with their competitive edge and good capacities. ROTA is mobilizing resources and is building the capacity of the community as a whole, and is partnering with other local non-governmental organizations to increase its impact.

Not since World War II has the world witnessed the number of refugees that we are witnessing today, according to Al-Mannai. The world is developing, but there is a huge percentage of the world that is lagging behind, and, he says, we are at risk of these two worlds growing apart from each other. ROTA’s commitment to partnership, sustainability, and building local capacity could go far in reversing this alarming trend.

Essa Al-Mannai is Executive Director at ROTA. Under his leadership, the organization has led initiatives in thirteen countries and local programs in Qatar. ROTA has led adult literacy trainings, youth leadership programs, and programs designed to benefit students and teachers. He has served on the steering committees of various international and local groups in the fields of development and social responsibility. Recently, Al-Mannai represented the Qatar NGO sector at the high-level event on Refugees’ Education in Emergency Situations hosted by the Permanent United Nations Missions of Portugal, Qatar, and Turkey.
While some of the workings of the Constitution have been transformed, formal institutions such as the Electoral College remain in place. The founders saw it as a kind of temporary parliament, a national assembly of elected, independent legislators who had made promises to their electors, but were also free to choose the president as they saw fit. In this context, direct democratic election was secondary, according to Lieven. “Today we have a situation where the Electoral College remains in certain respects highly undemocratic, but is democratically nailed to the candidate to whom they have promised their vote in advance,” he said.

When the Constitution was formulated, the smallest state had roughly one-twelfth of the population of the largest state, and most states had roughly similar populations. In 2010, there were seven states with more than ten million people each, and they had fourteen US senators. These are the big, urban states, multi-racial and largely Democratic in their leanings, and they account for approximately 45 percent of the US population. There were also seven states with fewer than one million people in 2010, accounting for about two percent of the total US population. These are overwhelmingly Republican-leaning states with white conservative populations, and they also have fourteen US senators. Basically, this means that California has roughly forty times less representation than a state like South Dakota.

The problem of democracy in the House of Representatives is a different one. Currently, due to the rights held by the states under the Constitution, forty-three out of fifty states have their constituency boundaries for the House determined by state legislatures and state executives, and they are politically manipulated. This despite the fact that the House was always conceived as a national popular legislature, popularly elected. The drawing of constituency boundaries to produce solid, unchangeable majorities for one party or another is favored not just by Republicans but also by black Democrats, who see this as a way to guarantee black representation in Congress (and their own seats).

As a result of this effectively rigged system, in the 2016 election, Republicans won the national popular vote, but by a margin vastly smaller than the number of seats won in the House. In 2012, Republicans lost the popular vote by a wide margin, but gained a majority of seats. “This raises not just questions about democracy, but it creates additional problems in America, especially a polarized America,” said Lieven. Only around seven percent of House seats were really contested in the last four elections. The result of this is to push the real political contest for the House from the area envisaged by the Constitution (elections) and into party primaries, in a way that inevitably favors extremists and increases polarization—since there is no longer any need for candidates to try to win candidates from the middle ground or the opposing party. “Battles in party primaries, always—in every country—tend to favor active activists and extremists,” said Lieven.

The courts have challenged individual cases of drawing district maps, but Lieven said, “It seems obvious that this should be done the way it is done just about everywhere else in democracies, which is to have an impartial national—not politically chosen—electoral commission that will distribute the seats, and be subject always to judicial review,” Lieven said. “The Supreme Court has to judge according to the Constitution, and it is very difficult to challenge the system as a whole constitutionally, given the power of states’ rights. Additionally, there is the pretty strange provision under the Constitution that the Supreme Court has far greater powers than those of any other Supreme Court that I know of in the world. Powers that are, in effect, legislative—not just judicial,” said Lieven. “And the Supreme Court has repeatedly made laws—not interpreted them—made new laws that have radically changed aspects of American life,” he said. When to this are added the Constitutional provisions that Supreme Court judges are chosen by the president, and for life, there is a very real possibility that President Trump could ensure a Republican grip on the Supreme Court for a generation to come, putting the Republicans in a position constitutionally to block large parts of a future democratic president’s legislative agenda.

Lieven predicted that as the United States changes demographically and whites sink from a majority to a plurality of the population, the effective disenfranchisement of millions of urban Americans and the demand for constitutional reform are going to become a much bigger issue in the future. However, he said it is highly unlikely that the Democrats under their existing leadership will raise this issue effectively.

Anatol Lieven teaches International Politics at Georgetown University in Qatar. He is the author of numerous books, including America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism (Oxford University Press, 2012).
HIGHLY SKILLED MIGRANTS: THE GULF AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

On January 29-30, 2017, CIRS hosted a working group on “Highly Skilled Migrants: The Gulf and Global Perspectives.” This took place under a broader joint research project on Highly Skilled Migrants in Qatar, launched in 2016 by Zahra Babar, CIRS Associate Director, and two co-collaborators, Nabil Khattab of the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, and Michael Ewers of Qatar University’s Social and Economic Survey Research Institute. Scholars with regional and global experience on the topic of skilled migration were invited to present their research during the two-day meeting. The topics included, among others: involuntary immobility of highly skilled migrants in Qatar; the impact of highly skilled migrants on GCC economies; structural factors and recruitment of highly skilled migrants in the GCC; transition from oil- to knowledge-based economies; categories, visa classes, and visa programs of skilled migrants; integration in the workplace; and the global competition among countries seeking to attract highly-skilled migrants.

Babar, Ewers, and Khattab presented “Immobile Highly-Skilled Migrants in Qatar,” an investigation of the motivations and experiences of highly-skilled migrants in the country. The authors analyzed the results of a nationally-representative survey of 300 high-skilled expatriates, as well as key-informant interviews with thirty-two individuals. The data indicates that under certain circumstances highly skilled migrants could become “involuntarily immobile” in Qatar. Under the restrictive migration regulations present in Qatar, certain highly skilled migrants are unable to switch jobs easily, either for professional advancement or to escape unsatisfying work experiences. This study also explored the relationship between highly skilled migrants’ countries of origin, and their experiences in Qatar, particularly their motivations for coming to the country and staying. Some data collected revealed that instability, conflict, and insecurity at home for certain Arab communities of highly skilled workers can, under some conditions, make these workers involuntarily immobile, as they cannot return home or move to resettle in a third country.

Martin Hvidt discussed the impact of highly skilled migrants on the economies of the Gulf states. He addressed the actual and potential contribution of highly skilled migrants to the growth of the Gulf states, exploring the nexus between economic growth and immigration of highly skilled migrants. While it is nearly impossible to document the actual impact on the economy of this group of migrants due to lack of data, Hvidt identifies not only the potential positive contributions the highly skilled migrants have made, but focuses on the barriers embodied in the policies that manage the intake and labor market conditions of the migrants.

François De Bel-Air focused on the structural factors in the GCC that are spurring policy changes for highly skilled migrants. She shared data on the characteristics and backgrounds of highly skilled migrants working in the GCC, using demographic and labor force surveys available for various states. She also reviewed the policy framework adopted for highly skilled workers in the region, and particularly certain reforms that have been implemented since the late 2000s. De Bel-Air stressed that policies have developed and been influenced along three pillars of economization, securitization, and management of migration. She suggested that there are structural explanations for the reforms of migration policies and the way they directly impact or do not impact highly skilled professionals in the region.

Binod Khadria presented “Transition from Oil- to Knowledge-Economies and Indian Student Mobilities to the Gulf: Education Cities in Three GCC Countries.” He examined the transition of GCC countries from oil-economies to knowledge-economies by tracing the development of educational institutions in four GCC cities: Doha in Qatar, Dubai and Abu Dhabi in UAE, and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia.

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The transitions in leadership in many countries of the region, despite their various natures, have re-shaped the foreign policy agendas not only of these states, but also across the Middle East. The UAE is an example, as the transition in leadership from Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan to Sheikh Khalifa Al Nahyan was coupled with a transformation of Emirati foreign policy, which became more assertive.

Agency, size, and material capacity of middle powers matter in assessing their influence, particularly as they are expected to take part in directly shaping the regional order, and indirectly influencing the international order. Thus, based on material capacity, countries like Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the pre-2003 Iraq could be considered destined middle powers. Israel and Algeria may be considered middle powers; while countries like Qatar and the UAE are influential regional actors. Some participants questioned the concept of “destined middle powers,” suggesting that states should have an interest in seeking a middle power status in order to be one. This interest should not be only expressed by the political leadership, but also supported by cohesive centers of power within the state, and commended by the public. A mismatch between interests of the leadership and its constituencies impacts the country’s ability to claim a specific status in the regional or international order. If the leadership fabricates a state identity that does not fit with the public narrative, tensions in the foreign policy of the state are inevitable. Material capacity and interest in seeking a middle power status are both indispensable.

Furthermore, colonial legacies have impacted states’ interests and public narratives. For example, Algerian foreign policy is an extension of its nationalist movement that, for years, fought for independence. These colonial experiences encourage states to avoid conceding sovereignty to regional alliances that may hinder their status and influence. The UAE, as an example, sought an independent foreign policy agenda to escape the Saudi hegemony over the Gulf Cooperation Council. At the same time, Middle Eastern middle powers tolerate alliances that may support their regional activism and competitions. Delving deeper in the Saudi hegemony over the GCC, one can see that Middle Eastern middle powers act differently through regional organizations than other middle powers as they aim to dominate rather than collaborate. However, economic interdependence among Middle Eastern middle powers has been the key to cooperation.

Norm entrepreneurship activities of Middle Eastern middle powers are critical in studying middle power politics in the region. Humanitarian diplomacy has been a prominent form of norm entrepreneurship exercised by middle powers across the world. However, there has been Western scrutiny and skepticism on Middle Eastern charity organizations’ activities, especially after the September 11 attacks. This has impacted not only humanitarian diplomacy of individual countries, but also regional organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Conference, as member states scaled back their charity activities to avoid accusations of supporting terrorism. This has impacted Middle Eastern states that seek a middle power status by using philanthropy as a way to project themselves as global good citizens.

Middle Eastern middle powers have also pursued other forms of norm entrepreneurship, such as conflict resolution and mediation. Since being involved in mediation is a key component of the behavioral definition of middle powers, Middle Eastern and aspiring middle powers have acted as active mediators and honest brokers. However, the Middle East is not an ideal setting for studying norm-driven mediation for three main reasons. First, there is a scarcity of comprehensive agreements and a tendency to only perpetuate ceasefires. Second, oil-rich countries of the Middle East seeking middle power status have relied only on incentive-diplomacy, which is not viable in ongoing diplomatic crises. Third, there is an ostensible weakness of multilateral settings and institutions in the Middle East.

Finally, why do countries seek a middle power status? There are not necessarily common motivations among states to pursue a middle power status. Each state has its own domestic, regional, and international dynamics at play driving its pursuit for a middle power status. Some states pursue status-seeking endeavors as a legitimization strategy. Claiming a higher status in the international or regional order induces the public and helps in preempting the spillover of instability to the country, as in the case of the UAE. It also drives attention away from domestic challenges affecting the public such as low GDP, youth bulges, and budget deficit, such as the case in Saudi Arabia.
Higher Education Policies

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Labor market justification arises from “manpower” planning. Based on long-term forecasts for economic growth and industrial development, the government estimates the amount of skilled labor that is needed in each specific field. Social demand for higher education, on the other hand, is based on the desire of students and their families for higher education, according to Habibi. Social demand is generally larger than the labor market demand because citizens observe that university graduates tend to earn more income, hold a higher social status, and have improved social interactions and opportunities. While there are many obvious social and cultural benefits to having a more educated population, he said, “You also have to look at the employment and labor market conditions for university graduates.”

Habibi shared statistics about recent spikes in university enrollment. Between 1995 and 2015, Iran and Turkey each saw enrollment increase by 500 percent. With a population of 90 million, Egypt has 2.5 million university students enrolled at present; Turkey’s population of eighty million has five million university students. Egyptian citizens aged 25–29 who hold a university degree increased by an astounding eighty percent in this timeframe.

Universities in Iran expanded very rapidly, especially since 2005, “because of political reasons and because of populist pressure,” Habibi reported. If you are a graduate in computer science or law, he said, you should have good opportunity for employment. However, he said, “we see surprisingly high unemployment rates in these and some other university majors like architecture and civil engineering.” He reported that in Iran in 2016, the unemployment rate for male university graduates was 13 percent, and 65.5 percent for females.

“Rather than focusing on labor market demand, politicians focused on satisfying the social demand for higher education, which has now resulted in unemployment and underemployment.”

Habibi and his colleagues observed that in every country, policymakers received some practical recommendations for addressing the issue of over-education through workforce planning, (for example, estimating the labor market need for university programs, and admitting students according to set requirements). But in every proposed case, he said, “solutions were rejected by policymakers because social demand for higher education was so strong that they could not say no to families that wanted to send their children to university. . . . Rather than focusing on labor market demand, politicians focused on satisfying the social demand for higher education, which has now resulted in unemployment and underemployment.”

Habibi cited two countries that have been able to contain the problem of over-education. Germany uses vocational training programs in high schools that are popular and effective, and many students choose vocational education for manufacturing jobs because they find good-paying jobs after graduation. This system has worked because there is cooperation between the private sector and the vocational training schools, Habibi said. Singapore has been successful in resisting populist demand and puts strict limits on university admissions. The government achieved this by reducing the role of the ministry of higher education in determining the enrollment quotas for universities, and it has empowered the ministry of manpower to play a more important role in higher-education planning. As a result, enrollment limits are closely linked to labor market demand projections for each university major.

“There are some steps that can be taken to prevent over-education, but they will require political will,” Habibi said. He cited the need for economic planning and a “cap and trade” concept, where a limit is placed on the number of students admitted into each major, and universities then compete for enrollment permits. He said the over-education crisis reminded him of the issue of inflation, and how countries manage to fight it. Using this analogy he said, “As long as the parliament is in charge of monetary policy it is hard to fight inflation because members of parliament would like to satisfy their constituency by increasing government expenditures, and they will force the central government to finance the budget deficit by printing more money. However, when the central bank of a country is independent, the politicians cannot force it to print money and cause inflation.” Transferring higher education enrollment decisions to an independent body, away from political and social pressures, can prevent over-education.

Nader Habibi is the Henry J. Leir Professor of the Economics of the Middle East at Brandeis University’s Crown Center for Middle East Studies. He previously served as managing director of economic forecasting and risk analysis for Middle East and North Africa with Global Insight Ltd. Habibi has more than twenty-eight years of experience in teaching, research, and management positions; including vice-president for research at Iran Banking Institute (Tehran), assistant professor of economics at Bilkent University (Ankara), and research fellow and lecturer on the political economy of the Middle East at Yale University.
of the shaykh and the size of the ṭarīqa. The smaller the order over which he asserts leadership, the more direct and over-riding is the authority of the shaykh. The larger the order, the more diffuse and limited is the authority of the shaykh. In addition, Sedgwick also examines the foundation and nature of the primarily exoteric, scripture-centered authority of the Sufi shaykh beyond the ṭarīqa, which includes the social influences of the person-centered authority. He argues that this sort of authority diminished during the twentieth century. The paper concludes with an exploration of more recent developments, particularly the political promotion of Sufism by some states, such as Morocco, as an alternative to other forms of "radical" Islam.

Robert Bianchi focused the discussion on "Religious Authorities and Reimagining the Hajj." He argued that the Saudi data leave little doubt that the quality of care for Hajjis varies enormously depending on several key factors that policymakers and religious leaders must address with greater honesty and determination. The most vulnerable pilgrim populations are poor people, women, and children from across Africa and Asia, as well as foreign workers, refugees, and illegal migrants living in Saudi Arabia. Most of the current proposals for Hajj reform ignore these high-risk groups. Saudi planners focus on promoting year-round pilgrimage to boost tourism revenues and high-end infrastructure. In most other countries, government-run Hajj agencies are busy cutting market-sharing deals with private business cartels and their political patrons. The combined effect of these policies is to weaken what remains of already inadequate regulations that are vital to the protection of all Hajjis. Meanwhile, support is also growing for more sweeping proposals to reimagine and reinvent the Hajj instead of fine-tuning the status quo. Some of these reforms are particularly likely to test the ingenuity and influence of religious leaders from all backgrounds because they challenge longstanding custom.

Leon Goldsmith presented his paper, "The 'Alawī Sheikhs of Religion: A Brief Introduction." He argues that the 'Alawī religious leadership has always lacked structure or explicit roles, but nonetheless, filled an important function in the social milieu at local levels. The 'Alawī mashayikh would cooperate to mediate among individuals and with other groups at times of danger or tension such as in 1936, 1973, and possibly in 2016, as indicated by the unverified Declaration of an Identity Reform. He also claimed that pressures were exerted on the sect to conform to mainstream religious identities, whether Sunni or Shi'i, throughout the twentieth century, from both inside Syria and at the regional level. Moreover, Goldsmith claimed that the Ba'ath/al-Asad regime has coopted 'Alawī religious leadership as an instrument of regime maintenance since 1982. The effect of this has been to further divide religious leadership between the traditional and regime-appointed mashayikh. The appointment of regime loyalists as religious sheikhs has seen the standard of sheikhs deteriorate and they have lost respect and independent status in their communities. Finally, the growing corruption and opportunism creeping into the 'Alawī religious class at the expense of the traditional sheikhs bode poorly for the future of religious leadership as a positive agent for political transformation and stability in Syria.

Albert de Jong shifted the discussion to pseudo-Islamic sects in his presentation on "Kings on Earth, Angels Beyond: Spiritual Elite Communities in the Contemporary Middle East." He argued that within the mosaic of religious communities of the pre-modern and modern Middle East, there is a wide range of religious communities that predated the rise of Islam alongside a cluster of communities that decidedly came into being after the Islamic conquests, in various distinct geographical, religious, and social contexts. De Jong questions how wholly distinct religious communities have not only survived, but also almost continually increased in the Middle East. He credits their survival and expansion to the organizations of these religious groups, and the role of their leaders. He suggested two fundamental patterns of the social and religious organization that have contributed to the survival and growth of these religious groups: endogamy and the characteristic division of the community into a small section of specialists in whom knowledge of the tradition is vested, and a large majority who do not (need to) know much about their religion.

Michael Leezenberg examines the transformations in the leadership of minority religious communities in "Northern Iraq: The Yezidis, Shabak, and Assyrians in Northern Iraq." He said in some ways these communities have shared the same fate, to some degree being at the mercy of their geography, which has left them ensnared by conflict that has only accelerated over the past three decades. While these communities were vulnerable even during the Ba'thist years, in post-Saddam Iraq their conditions have grown much more precarious. Most recently they have suffered by becoming a target for violence by ISIS. Leezenberg traces the converging and diverging trajectories of these groups, focusing particularly on the role of their religious leaders and how they have dealt with crises and conflict at different points in the bloody history of the region.
Khadria argues that the transition economies of the three countries are trying to tackle their worsening balance of trade arising from the decline in export of oil and natural gas in recent years. He analyzes two trends: expansion in the number of Indian students in foreign universities in the GCC countries, and the deepening of foreign direct investment in the education sector in the aforementioned cities.

Payal Banerjee led a discussion on “Skilled Migration: Categories, Visa Classes, and Visa Programs.” She offered an introductory analysis of the different visa classes and typologies, the skilled/unskilled dyad in particular, to investigate how the reification and normalization of “skilled immigration,” as a category, result in very troubling outcomes. Banerjee argued that once a motif classification gets cemented on the basis of the absence or presence to skills/education, immigrants’ entitlements, legitimacy, and success and failure, get calibrated on the basis of individual characteristics. This obscures the salience of racially-coded structural inequality that is evidenced in a number of recent studies that document skilled immigrants’ downward occupational mobility and various forms of marginalization, despite educational qualification and language skills. Furthermore, Banerjee claimed that the skilled/unskilled binary detracts from analyzing the role of immigration/visa policies in the production of tenuous legal status, which results in immigrants’ exploitation and vulnerability, in the low-wage as well as skilled, high-wage sectors.

In her presentation, Micheline van Riemsdijk discussed “Integration of Highly Skilled Migrants in the Workplace: A Multi-Scalar Model.” She argued that skilled migrants are often expected to adapt easily to the host culture based on their social, cultural, and human capital. However, these migrants experience integration challenges that have been little addressed in existing literature. Using a case study of foreign-born engineers in the Norwegian oil and gas industry, van Riemsdijk proposed a multi-scalar conceptual framework to examine the integration of skilled migrants in the workplace. She combined literature on immigrant integration and diversity management with data from interviews and a survey of foreign-born engineers. The framework she developed serves as a tool to move beyond single-scale, unidirectional studies of immigrant integration toward a multi-scalar, inter-linked conceptualization of the integration of skilled migrants.

Finally, Lucie Cerna and Mathias Czaika’s study investigates the “Rising Stars in the Global Race for Talent? A Comparative Analysis of Brazil, India, and Malaysia.” The paper examines how emerging economies increase their attractiveness for international talent. In order to analyze the strategies of the “Global South” to attract or retain high-skilled people, the authors focus on the economies of Brazil, India, and Malaysia. Based on fifteen expert interviews in these countries, the authors describe the short-term practices and long-term strategies of these countries in reversing the brain drain by recruiting and retaining highly skilled workers. They argue that while Malaysia has become an active player and innovator on the international talent recruitment market, the other two countries still consider themselves as “self-sufficient” by relying either on their domestic skill supply or on engaging with their skilled diaspora, in the case of India. Finally, the authors argue that despite the rising demand for human capital in these countries, which are at different stages in a “migration policy transition,” they still lack sufficient legal, administrative, and economic provisions to bring in skilled foreign workers in significant numbers.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Babar, Ewers, and Khattab highlighted that the original contributions of the group’s papers to the existing literature will greatly expand the scholarly lens on highly skilled migrants, moving it outside the traditional focus on OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. The articles are due to be published in a special issue of a journal in the near future.
CIRS Screens Suzi Mirgani’s Film “Caravan”

CIRS hosted a screening of Suzi Mirgani’s latest short film titled *Caravan*, for an audience of students, staff, faculty, and guests at Georgetown University in Qatar. The short film, which premiered at the Doha Film Institute’s Ajyal Youth Film Festival in 2016, tells the story of a cross-section of Qatari society stuck in a traffic jam. Mirgani, who is the Managing Editor at CIRS, also used the screening as opportunity to talk about the production and themes in the work.

The seven-minute short film, shot on location at The Pearl-Qatar, took a day to film and more than two months of preparation. It depicts a type of lyrical relay, as the camera zooms in and out of the stationary cars. The voices and thoughts of drivers and passengers stuck in the traffic jam play out in a stream of consciousness style. In the film, the actors are located on a literal bridge to nowhere, as the end of the road disappears into the sand. Mirgani explained that this can be seen to symbolize a path from prosperity to nothing, as construction is still underway on the man-made island. The mix of built and unbuilt can also be viewed as a metaphor for the rapidly developing country, and its often transient residents. “If you give in to the traffic jam, it can be a space of reflection,” said Mirgani.

Featuring vehicles filled with taxi drivers, tourists, and families (speaking languages ranging from Arabic to Tagalog to Urdu to Swahili), the film represents the range of nationalities, interests, and languages present in Qatar. “This film was a reflection of what I see on a daily basis,” said Mirgani.

Azmi Bishara on “Did Democracy Lose this Round? And Why?”

In fact, “political sectarianism, which is exploiting these lines of identity in the struggle to control the state, is a new phenomenon.” Bishara noted that it would be impossible to build a sustainable democracy within these polarized and factionalized societies.

A fourth reason for why democracy failed in the Arab world is due to the military’s historical stranglehold on political systems in some of these countries. When imperial powers withdrew from Arab lands, new national armies were created from the remnants of colonial military structures, and these emerged as the most organized and powerful entities from the chaos of newly forming postcolonial nations. Bishara said that “we still live the issue of politicization of the military in the Arab world,” and these armies have become increasingly politically motivated. Powerful figures within Arab militaries have strong political ambitions and think of themselves as both powerholders and as watchdogs in the balance of power. For example, in “Egypt, the army achieved a kind of autonomy before 2011,” but when the government collapsed during the Egyptian protests, “the army thought that there was an opportunity, reinforced by the inability of the elites to reach a bargain,” he explained. He drew a comparison between Sisi’s military coup in Egypt and that of Pinochet in Chile in the 1970s.

Although these many political impasses facing the Arab world might seem insurmountable, Bishara concluded on a positive note by arguing that “these hard times are suitable for rethinking,” and for encouraging a new generation of political elites who can accept disagreements and who can debate and bargain to reach compromises with each other for the sake of a future that respects democratic principles.

Azmi Bishara is the General Director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. A prominent researcher and writer, Bishara has published numerous books and academic papers on political thought, social theory, and philosophy, in addition to several literary works.
BY THE TIME I WAS TWENTY-FIVE, I WAS working as an Arabic language instructor for non-natives just to earn a living. Even though I had published articles in the most prestigious Arab literary magazines, and my professors at Cairo University predicted that I would become a most prominent literary critic in the Arab world, I decided to change my field to language teaching. In an attempt to change the field itself, I began to question the grammar-translation approach, and leaned towards a learner-centered approach. This method enabled a move away from artificial texts prepared by language teachers for language learners, to more authentic texts within the context of Egyptian colloquial instruction. This was considered a radical new practice, since teaching colloquial Arabic was against the mainstream already established in the field.

In 1985, I introduced the concept of “media Arabic” to help learners read and understand both written and oral Arab media. In 1990, working with two colleagues, Mahmoud Al-Batal and Kristen Brustad, we began a new Arabic textbook series called Al-Kitaab (“the book,” in Arabic). The first introductory volume, Alif Baa, appeared in 1993, and was followed by parts one, two, and three between 1995 and 1997. Already in its third edition, published by Georgetown University Press in 2009, Al-Kitaab has become a standardized Arabic learner’s textbook.

After twenty-five years of teaching Arabic for non-natives, I tried to find an answer to the question: What is wrong with Arabic language instruction for native Arabic speakers? Why do native Arabic speakers have trouble mastering Modern Standard Arabic, even after twelve years of study? To address this issue, I established an Arabic writing program at the American University in Cairo in 2000 that catered specifically to students who graduated from Arabic schools and yet were still unable to use Arabic functionally.

In 2007, I came to Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. The idea was to work for a couple of years, and then retire. I mistakenly thought the work would be very easy, as the textbook used in the curriculum/syllabus was my very own co-authored book, Al-Kitaab. However, I faced a whole new challenge in teaching Arab students who had spent years studying in international schools where the language instruction was not in Arabic. The challenge was that these students were neither non-native, nor native, at least in relation to Modern standard. In 2008, my colleague Yehia Muhammed and I devised a program to introduce sections of the book to these students separating them from non-native Arabic speakers. In 2010, SFS-Qatar also established an Arabic Heritage Language program using a textbook dedicated to Arabic language heritage learners, which will launch in the near future.

In 2010-2012, while leading a research team to study Arabic instruction in Qatari schools, I found evidence that the problems originate in elementary school education. Since 2014, I have been working on a series of textbooks for elementary international schools in a joint project with Sheikh Faysal Al-Thani, which will come to light within the next few months. I plan to retire at the end of this year, and will devote my time to working on my long-dreamt-of textbook series on Islamic Arabic that will be aimed at non-native Muslims.

Call for Papers

CIRS has an open call for papers, and accepts submissions in English and Arabic to its Occasional Paper and Asia Papers series throughout the year. CIRS publishes original research on a broad range of issues including international relations, political science, economics, and Islamic studies, among others.

The Occasional Paper series addresses issues of relevance to the Gulf and the Middle East regions, and with a broad thematic focus on Asia, The Asia Papers aims to attract researchers working on a range of interdisciplinary issues across Asia. We welcome papers from practitioners, academics, policymakers, and researchers.

Papers should be a maximum of 10,000 words and cannot have been previously published, or currently under consideration for publication, elsewhere. All submissions are subject to a double-blind review process. Inquiries about publications may be directed to Managing Editor at CIRS, Suzi Mirgani at sm623@georgetown.edu.

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