

The Liberal Arts in Kuwait

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AS HE ESCORTS ME around the new American University of Kuwait, which is scheduled to open its doors in September 2004 and is located in an upscale neighborhood just two blocks from what is here called the Arabian Gulf, Dr. Shafeeq Ghabra, the university's founding president, smiles proudly and a bit mischievously. In the pleasant, mid-day January sun, Ghabra shows off the half-finished buildings and partly-landscaped grounds. As he describes the architectural design of the emerging library, classrooms, faculty offices, administrative wing, student cafeteria and courtyard, and athletic fields, his constant theme is openness. As befits Kuwait's first, small, private liberal arts college. And as befits a Kuwaiti liberal who has risked his career to persuade his fellow citizens that it is in their hearts as well as in their interest to govern themselves tolerantly and democratically.

Ghabra is not the only driving force behind the university. It is being financed by two exceptionally wealthy brothers, members of the royal family, who run the Kuwait Projects Company (KIPCO), the region's largest diversified set of businesses. Ghabra characterizes one brother as a "visionary" who believes in the value of a liberal arts education for deepening the soul. The other, as Ghabra tells it, is a "hard-headed businessman" who believes in the Kuwait private sector's need for young men and women with sharp analytical skills, knowledge of history, politics, and international affairs, and independence of mind.

Ghabra, who holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Texas, is a former director of the Kuwait Information Office in Washington and a former professor of Political Science at Kuwait University. He brings a combination of visionary thinking and hard-headed planning to his task. (Disclosure: I have discussed with him a collaboration to bring to Kuwait visiting lecturers on the theory and practice of liberal democracy.) For one thing,

the curriculum must be adapted to the needs of Kuwaiti students. While AUK is based on the American model, it cannot, like American liberal arts colleges tend to do these days, neglect or belittle the basics. The language of instruction at AUK will be English, and its intensive first-year program will require four courses in English literature as well as courses in math, computers, the natural sciences, and economics.

OF COURSE the curriculum is shaped by the meaning of "liberal" in Kuwait, which differs in a crucial respect from its most common meaning in the United States. A Kuwaiti liberal like Ghabra is a man of the left who stands for individual freedom, equality before the law, and democratic self-government. And of course Kuwaiti liberals oppose the legislation of religion and favor less strict interpretations of Islamic law. But urgent for them as well is the fight for smaller government, privatization of the economy, and opening the domestic economy to international investment.

This general friendliness to business among Kuwaiti liberals is not surprising in a society where dependence on government largesse is a principal threat to freedom. This dependence is hard to break since the government controls the nation's only natural resource--a whopping 10 percent of the world's proven oil reserves--and employs upwards of 95 percent of the citizenry.

Accordingly, AUK comprises two schools, a college of arts and sciences and a school of management. Students concentrating in one will be required to take classes in the other, on the grounds that a liberally educated man or woman must understand something of how the private sector operates, and a responsible and successful businessman or woman must understand something of how the soul functions.

Asked how AUK will deal with the Gender Segregation Law, which requires separation between the sexes in higher education, Ghabra smiles. "We don't like this law. We don't think it is proper way for education," he says.

What does the law mean in practice for his school? "You can interpret the law liberally. You can interpret the law conservatively," he continues cagily. "The conservative interpretation requires full separation even in buildings and activities and everything." He pauses, as if it would be prudent to stop there. But he is only too pleased to continue: "The liberal interpretation of the law would mean you don't really bother in activities, you don't bother in the cafeteria, you don't bother anywhere else. You try to create some divide in classes." He adds that in practice, even that liberal degree of segregation has not proven workable at the state run Kuwait University.

Does Ghabra anticipate that this liberal interpretation and looser application of the law will cause problems? "It could. And I have to be prepared." Which means not confrontation, but meetings with members of parliament to explain his position and persuade them of the reasonableness of his approach.

GHABRA IS NO STRANGER to breaking down barriers through discussion and persuasion. In February 2002, while heading the Kuwait Information Office in Washington, he sparked a national furor back home by appearing on a panel at the World Economic Forum in New York discussing the Middle East with three Israelis. The Islamists denounced his participation as a despicable criminal act. To spare the government a crisis, Ghabra tendered his resignation, but he did so by means of an eloquent letter to the public which was published in Kuwait's five major daily newspapers.

The letter, which defended the propriety and value of public discussion with Israelis, generated a powerful wave of public support--from the media, from the parliament, from ordinary citizens, and even from some religious groups. In the end, the Minister of Information declined Ghabra's resignation.

Where did Ghabra learn to value toleration? No doubt from many sources. These days he likes to point to his experience in America, during the year he spent when he was 18 at Lincoln College in Springfield, Illinois. A wide-eyed radical in his student days in the early '70s, Ghabra was amazed to discover that his conservative mid-western professors and classmates patiently listened to him and engaged him civilly on the issues. It is this orientation for which the "American" in Ghabra's American University of Kuwait stands. Of such mischief he has every right to be proud. And his fellow Kuwaitis grateful.

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