

The Arab Gulf's previously all-male ruling elite is investing in female brains as the winning card for information-fueled power.

Digital Scheherazades in the Arab World

FATEMA MERNISSI

In May 2005, I listened attentively to the questions of the 30 journalists my Spanish publisher had scheduled to meet with me in Madrid to promote the translation of my book, *Les Sindbads marocains: Voyage dans le Maroc civique* (Moroccan Sinbads: Travels through Civic Morocco). From their questions, which all dealt with the veil and terrorism, it was clear that they had no clue about the strategic issue mobilizing the Arab world: *al-fitna raqmiya* (digital chaos), the destruction of space frontiers by information technology.

The key problem that makes everyone anxious today in the Arab world—elites and masses, heads of state and street vendors, men and women—is the digital chaos induced by information technologies such as the Internet. These new technologies have destroyed the *hudud*, the frontier that divided the universe into a sheltered private arena, where women and children were supposed to be protected, and a public one where adult males exercised their presumed problem-solving authority.

Now, according to a best-selling book, *The Internet and Love* (Al Internet Wa I-Hub), by Imam Qaradawi, a star host on the Arab television network Al Jazeera, the satellite and the Internet have spawned apocalyptic chaos in Arab civilization by destroying that division of spheres. The imam's book, which is advertised on the popular IslamOnline website, is alerting crowds to the fact that Arab women and youth now navigate freely on the web and communicate intimately with strangers, escaping religious and parental censorship.

"Since the World Wide Web invaded our lives," explains Qaradawi, "we have been going through nonstop transformations. . . . The faraway has become nearer with a simple push on the keyboard. This has deeply affected our societies,

which have suffered from a lack of communication and the lack of educational quality entertainment. . . . Suddenly, the new technologies have provided opportunities to communicate and entertain oneself, and this without the supervision of a censoring authority or a controller to whom you are accountable. . . . This leaves individual responsibility as the sole controlling agency. And unfortunately, we have never cared to develop an educational system which focused on developing individual responsibility."

But what is also new is that even imams suggest we stop thinking about static solutions like strengthening authority and reinforcing *hudud* and focus instead on inventing strategies that nurture a civilization of ethical nomadism, where individual responsibility creates order. The Arab world is a besieged place, but in many quarters the response to chaos is quietly shifting from crying to action. This shift helps explain the emergence of what I call "digital Scheherazades," after the fictional storyteller of *1,001 Nights*. Her successors are Arab women who take advantage of new communication strategies as the only initiatives likely to liberate both themselves and their countries.

DIGITAL CHAOS

Imagine the anxiety of a parent reading "The Electronic Disfiguration of Our Children," an article by an Egyptian psychoanalyst, Dr. Khalil Fadel, that appeared in the Kuwait-based *Al Arabi*, one of the most widely circulated cultural magazines in the region. Fadel identifies the child as the most vulnerable victim of the Western-made electronic war games that invade "our children's rooms and are available in the cyber-café's which now exist on every street corner." According to Fadel, these war games are responsible for inciting violent behavior among Arab youth because they glorify "solitude, narcissism, and hatred of the other," all of which reflect the cultural choices of the Westerners who produce these games.

FATEMA MERNISSI is a research scholar at the University Institute for Scientific Research in Rabat, Morocco. Her books include *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (Washington Square Press, 2001).

But if electronic war games are bad enough, sex is worse, according to an article—"Electronic Sex Attack on the Arab World"—by Ahmed Mohamed Ali in the Saudi-based magazine *Al Majalla*. Ali, who believes this attack was first launched in 1999, describes "the unimaginable profit made from selling virtual prostitution or electronic sex on the Internet" to Arabs. Parents, he says, quoting Al-Hami Abdelaziz, an Egyptian psychology professor, are totally at a loss about what to do: "They know that the future of their children depends on their mastering such technologies, but they are afraid they will slip into these pornographic websites. The fact is that the parents are totally unarmed and ill-equipped to protect their children from such dangers."

Add to this the booming Arab satellite industry of erotic video-clips targeting youth. These clips constitute a terrifying challenge to the Islamic vision of the world, where sex belongs exclusively to the private sphere (which explains why no straightforward pornographic films are to be found on Arab satellite stations such

as Arabsat and Nilesat). The video-clip is a tricky phenomenon, since its official objective is entertainment through music and songs. For Arabs, music and songs, just like poetry, have been regarded, even before Islam and since, as important sources of licit pleasure. Now they must confront the digital chaos induced by music video-clips that slip into explicit sex between unmarried people surrounding the singer. As Patricia Kabala has written, the video-clip "has without doubt become a symbol of access via satellite television stations and the Internet to the previously inaccessible sexually explicit material that state-controlled television channels in the Middle East censored and continue to censor."

Yet what is interesting once again is that instead of wasting time in complaints as Arabs usually do, a new attitude has appeared: the desire to invent solutions. Some ethically minded operators are trying to exploit that very video-clip technology to spread Islamic values among the youth. To counteract the sexual flood, investing in video-clips to promote young attractive religious singers as role models—such as Sami Yusuf Yusu, a British-born Muslim of Azeri origin—is one of the emerging positive responses to the previously frightening new information technologies. The lesson one gets from

reading about the video-clip debate is that either you transform yourself into an agile digital surfer or you fade away.

It is this kind of immense civilizational shift in the Arab world, where men are finally embarking on becoming skilled digital nomads instead of decrying the frontier's collapse and dreaming of harems for their wives, that I tried to share with the Spanish journalists obsessed by the veil and terrorism during my Madrid encounter in May 2005. Although the Spanish city of Gibraltar is just 13 kilometers from the Moroccan port of Tangiers, I realized that Spaniards had no idea about the revolution that information technologies have produced in our part of the world. And one reason for this is the fact that in Madrid's plush hotel, which advertised itself as satellite-connected, I could not connect to my favorite, Al Jazeera, or to any one of

the two hundred pan-Arab satellite channels beaming now in the Mediterranean.

At one point, I tried to illustrate this change by sharing with them the extraordinary emergence of women I saw in the Arab Gulf during a

visit to Bahrain in March 2005. I tried to describe to them Mai al-Khalifa, a historian who in less than a decade has created modern spaces such as museums and cultural centers that encourage dialogue between the sexes and the generations. I tried to explain that this unexpected emergence of women in the oil-rich Arab Gulf is more significant than the question of the veil in the Muslim migrant community, but the Spanish journalists were trapped in their own veils and terror.

I left Madrid feeling guilty and helpless, an intellectual unable to carry out her job of facilitating dialogue. The journalists continued to haunt me after my return to Morocco, and when I saw al-Khalifa on a pan-Arab satellite television one day, I caught myself wishing they could share that experience with me.

THE HISTORIAN ON TV

The café near University Mohamed V in Rabat was full of young students and teachers when al-Khalifa appeared on *Al Arabia*, a new rival of *Al Jazeera* that is financed by the Saudis. The manager of the café automatically turned up the television's volume because he was a fan of Turki al-Dakhil, the show's anchor, an electrifying young man who appears on the screen dressed in the Gulf region's

Self-confidence and ability seem to be key characteristics of the new Digital Scheherazades.

traditional white robes just to surprise you by his insolent remarks toward all kinds of authorities.

At this moment, I noticed a striking change in the café: conversations came to a halt even though al-Khalifa was dressed like a professional woman in a white suit and looked very much on guard, unlike belly dancers who blink their eyes and sway hands and buttocks. The dynamics of what occurred in my Rabat café were as important for me as what was happening on the television screen. (When I was a child, the only women one could see in my hometown, Fez, in movies or on television when it made its appearance in Morocco in the 1960s, were belly dancers and singers; intellectual women were not part of the fare.)

It was by chance that I was in the café, because I am a rather homebound creature. I was invited there by Kamal, one of my favorite colleagues, who is a *1,001 Nights* expert. He was intrigued by what I had told him about my March 2005 Bahrain trip because there is very little cultural exchange between North Africa and the Gulf. The gender ratio in the café was typical of Morocco: 10 women among 40 or so customers. Moroccan women, starting with myself, are so exhausted by their daily chores that they rarely think about going out in the evening.

One of al-Khalifa's best-known books deals with the Qarmatians, a controversial group of Shiites who rebelled in the tenth century against the Sunni Abbasid caliphs, described as terrorists by some historians and as the founders of the first republic in Islam by others. I thought this would be the topic al-Dakhil, the Al Arabia host, would start with. To my great surprise, he opted for a very personal angle instead: Why was al-Khalifa so controversial in her own country? One has to realize that the title of the show is *Idaat*, which literally means "Flashes." The host is supposed to help the viewer discover some secret corner of those he invites to his show.

Why, wondered al-Dakhil, was al-Khalifa generating so much debate in Bahrain concerning the projects she promoted as one of the first women to hold an official position? (Al-Khalifa was the first woman to be appointed in Bahrain as assistant undersecretary for culture and national heritage.) Was it because she was a woman, or because she was incompetent, coming from an academic background and being thus unfit for practical work? Some people at the Ministry of Information, al-Dakhil argued, were saying that academics are too isolated in their ivory towers to be effective cultural operators.

"That intellectuals are unable to invent effective cultural strategies is a totally wrong assumption," al-

Khalifa responded brusquely, brushing her black hair away from her face. Such statements, she added, are typical of bureaucrats who are in fact totally unfit to design the dynamic cultural strategies the Arab world needs to face the challenges posed by new technologies, and this for the simple reason that they lack vision. "I am an intellectual who has both a clear vision (*ruya*) of the future and the capacity to go ahead and act by undertaking successful innovative projects." Only intellectuals, she stressed, have *ruya*, a precious gift amid today's global chaos.

The reaction to al-Khalifa's response in the café was amazing. The crowd laughed merrily. One of the students stood up to declaim the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish's poem about his compatriot Edward Said, in which he celebrates a strong vision rooted in one's reading of the past as the key allowing the Palestinian diaspora to survive and thrive: "If your past is a tough experience, make your future meaningful by developing a vision. . . . My dream directs my steps. And my vision places my dream in my lap like a friendly cat."

THE VISION THING

The absence of a clear vision of the future has been identified by Arab intellectuals as a contributor to the dangerous political disengagement of Arab youth and their confusion, which makes them vulnerable to the violence spread on the Internet. The new voices of the Arab diaspora include the Palestinian Khaled Hroub, who lives in London but is extremely influential among young Arabs because he hosts a show on Al Jazeera. He argues in his recent book on Hamas that the generational gap is particularly explosive in Arab society.

Indeed, one of the causes of terrorism is the demographic split between the aging minority of decision makers and the youthful majority they are supposed to represent. In a burlesque article published in the very academic journal of the Arab League, Hroub notices that being "decadently old" (*chaykhukha*) does not help Arab leaders design pertinent strategies for the majority of the population, which is young. The tiny minority that monopolizes political decisions, he says, "operates on a set of concepts and reasoning frameworks that have very little relevancy to the youth's own problems." It is this politico-demographic divide, he concludes, that explains "the disastrous scorn of our younger generations for politics." And this brings us to the enigma of why the café youth reacted so strongly when the word *ruya* came up on the television show.

To stop terrorism, Arab leaders have to provide Arab youth with a vision of a future in which they have a role to play as defenders of an ethical planet, explains Nabil Abdel-Fattah of the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Egypt. The frustration of Arab youth results from the elite's failure to articulate a clear ethical view of a future in which every individual has a mission and a purpose. It is this emergence of the *ruya* as the antidote to terrorism that explains the café crowd's response to al-Khalifa's defiant answer to her television host. She was reminding him that her *ruya* is the likely reason why some Bahrain government bureaucrats were angered by her audacious cultural projects, such as museums and cultural centers that teach children to understand that diversity is the root of their identity.

Because Arabs in general and youth in particular are fed up with fanaticism and censorship, neighborhood cafés are turning, thanks to the new culture-focus satellite television outlets such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabia, to debates over *ruya*, visions of the future as the key to empowerment.

Many men in the café followed the rough exchange between al-Dakhil and his guest with beaming smiles, including my colleague Kamal. I asked him why he was smiling and he said because al-Khalifa's quick response to al-Dakhil was so spontaneous: "I think Arab intellectuals should create a fund to support this lady," he said, "because she is creating fantastic publicity for us. If she continues appearing on television shows making such statements, we, the poor marginalized intellectuals, will soon be receiving well-paid job offers to replace our vision-blind bureaucrats in all the 22 Arab states!"

Kamal was right, because very few Arab male intellectuals would have dared to declare with so much self-confidence, as al-Khalifa did on television, that they are visionaries and that only far-sighted thinkers can invent futuristic strategies for an Arab world doubly assaulted by both new information technologies and the powerful American military. Yet one of the positive changes initiated by these assaults is that people have stopped complaining

and are going one step further toward identifying concrete solutions: first defeat the bureaucrats who have monopolized power for decades.

It is a daring message that increasingly bold women, making use of the new information technologies, are proclaiming to fellow Arabs. In the Arab Gulf, the amazing thing about this new breed of women is that growing numbers of them, like al-Khalifa, do not limit themselves to writing but manage to jump into action as well. "She, like Sheikha Hussa Al-Sabah from Kuwait, builds museums and cultural centers like other women turn out couscous tagines!" remarked my colleague, who always con-

demned my decision not to get involved in politics. For Kamal, who, unlike me, became involved in politics and paid for it by having trouble with the Moroccan police, it is clear that now only intellectuals can help rulers to engineer power and engage the future.

The challenge for the intellectuals is to help rulers equip the youth to navigate responsibly on the

Internet. In particular, these solutions must help young people navigate not only in space but also in time. In a globalized planet where meeting strangers daily is the only way to make a living, mastering time is the secret of graceful navigation. To travel in the past, that is, to navigate in time, is the best way to teach oneself tolerance and respect for diversity.

Mobility is the name of the game, be they men or women, local or exiled, Sunni or Shiite, upper-class or from modest backgrounds. We are seeing a sudden shift from complaining about the West and its technological superiority to deciding to begin using the new information technologies to protect ourselves by participating in building a more just and humanist planet. Oil wealth, which makes it easy for visionaries to step quickly from vision to realization, has helped fuel this shift in the Arab Gulf. But so has the emergence of women in a region supposedly condemned to archaic conservatism.

WOMEN CAN PLAY, TOO

Is it because the threats of destabilization and terrorism are so great in the oil-rich Arab Gulf that



A Woman in Charge

Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi, minister of economy and planning for the UAE, stands in the offices of Tejari.com, an online marketplace.

emirs and sheikhs are keen on promoting e-government and women as information technology and financial allies? Or is it because the new information technologies are perceived by them as a fantastic opportunity to get rid of American domination and empower themselves to become global cybersurfers? What is certain is that electronic surfing has become a favorite sport of the Gulf rulers, and they are discovering a secret rule of this game: that it is essential for women to join in.

Al-Khalifa's emergence in Bahrain is impossible to understand if you do not realize that Bahrain is one of the first Arab countries to invest in e-government. The first step was the creation of an electronic visa system—an e-visa service—that went into operation in mid-2004. The second was reported on the front page of the *Bahrain Tribune* on March 9, 2005: "King Stresses Larger Role for Women." The story explained that "His Majesty the King, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, yesterday requested all government and civil administrations and organizations to help implement the National Strategy for the Advancement of Bahraini Women."

To make sure that his routine-inclined bureaucrats grasped what he meant, the king provided a detailed description: "The implementation of the National Strategy, the first of its type in the country, will help us achieve our objective, which is to see women assume their roles fully as dependable partners to men and fully capable of contributing to building the family, the society, and the state, and eventually, to be involved in making decisions in modern Bahrain."

It is important to note, in this context, that the number of women employed in Bahrain has risen from just over 5 percent in 1971 to more than 40 percent today. Now how can you explain this strange coincidence between the onset of e-government and women's invasion of the labor force and their promotion as public actors if not by a cataclysmic shift in the region's ideological references? Is there not a repudiation of fanatic conservatism to embark on new horizons where power implies feminization of decision making?

In a humorous 2004 article entitled "The 50 Most Powerful Arab Women," which appeared in the Dubai-based Arabic version of *Forbes* magazine, the editor, Rasha Owais, and her team undertook a

survey to answer that question. They came to the conclusion that, beyond the traditional profile of the wives and daughters of heads of state, a new breed of digitally literate and financially skilled women has emerged on the Arab scene.

Some of them do fit the profile of wives of leaders, but—unlike, say, Egypt's Suzan Mubarak or Queen Rania of Jordan—the new Digital Scheherazades are themselves communication wizards. For example, Sheikha Muza, the wife of the emir of Qatar, the man who financed Al Jazeera, launched in September 2005 the first Arab children's channel. The ambitious objective, financed by a foundation she controls, is to snatch Arab kids from the foreign television influence by providing them with a new ethical content where education and entertainment mix.

Being from a royal family helps, of course, but not automatically: I know many wives of powerful, rich men who spend their time swallowing anti-depression pills. Self-confidence and ability seem

to be key characteristics of the new Digital Scheherazades.

When you start looking for them instead of focusing on the veiled women, as many Europeans do,

you are amazed by their rapidly growing number. The minister of economy and planning for the United Arab Emirates, for example, is a woman: Lubna al-Qasimi. Before assuming this post, al-Qasimi, who has a computer science degree from the University of California, was a senior manager of the Information Systems department of the Dubai Port Authority and participated in the launch of her country as a planetary digital hub.

INVESTING IN FEMALE BRAINS

Did al-Qasimi owe her success to her being the niece of Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah, one of the United Arab Emirate kingdoms? There are numerous nieces of powerful emirs and sheikhs in the Gulf who never manage to emerge as top players in the power game. One of her favorite slogans is "I have earned my desk."

Indeed, those who still identify the region with veiling women and traditional archaism miss the essential point: the Arab Gulf's previously all-male ruling elite is investing in female brains as the winning card for information-fueled power. "We have a

Modern Arab Gulf emirs are suddenly investing in information technology as their power base and promoting women as their partners.

system for our children whereby we encourage them to gain experience outside the group first," says Muhamed al-Sayer, the billionaire chairman of a Kuwait-based group of companies. "For example, my daughter Lulwa spent eight years with Gulf Bank and is its head of Treasury. Male and female family members are offered the same opportunities."

It is this fascinating paradox that explains the emergence of Digital Scheherazades. Because men in the Arab Gulf have chosen to invest in communication as a power base, we can understand why one of the most important modern museum initiatives in Kuwait was that of Hussa al-Sabah, who forced Saddam Hussein to give back the cultural heritage pieces stolen from Kuwait after Iraq's invasion, and whose main supporter was her husband. Kuwait is also home to the very young Maha al-Ghunaim, the vice chairwoman and managing director of Global Investment House, which had net profits of \$73 million in 2004.

In Qatar, where the clever emir propelled his tiny capital of Doha into a global player by financing Al Jazeera, one would expect to find Digital Scheherazades taking advantage of the kingdom's new information technologies. Such is the case with Hanadi Nasser, a businesswoman who has become a key player as the managing director of Amwal, a well-funded Qatari investment company.

THE CALIPH'S PARTNER

According to my friend Kamal, Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who took power in Baghdad in 786 AD, is the key to elucidating the enigma of the Digital Scheherazades. The caliph's wife, Zubaida, made herself famous by digging wells along the Baghdad-Mecca road she had built to transform Muslims' yearly hajj into a comfortable and engaging trip.

Both Harun and Zubaida were heroes of the *1,001 Nights*, invented by eighth- and ninth-century Baghdad male street-storytellers who mirrored in their tales the fascination of Muslim elites and crowds with strangers as a source of magic diversity. And the primary fascinating strangers for men are indeed women. So, although Scheherazade, the storyteller of the *1,001 Nights*, was supposed to be Persian, it was Arab women like Princess Zubaida—who managed to seduce the Caliph

Harun while digging wells and building walls to provide creature comforts during the hajj—who inspired our Baghdad storytellers.

These male storytellers forbade in their fiction the imaginary Scheherazade to speak during the day and condemned her to limit her activity to the night only, but modern historians are discovering that Zubaida exercised her power 24 hours a day.

Limiting women's power to the night while forbidding them from exercising authority during daylight—the monopoly of males—is a deep-seated reflex that goes back far into history. It is well condensed in the slogan-like sentence that ends mechanically each of the 1,001 stories: "When dawn overtook Scheherazade, she lapsed into silence." But limiting women's power to the private sphere has always been a male fiction. And the defensive fear of the feminine has always gone together with the fear of strangers. When the leaders of a nation embark on communication as their way to glory, welcoming the different other as a partner is the magic shift that explains their success.

To understand why modern Arab Gulf emirs are suddenly investing in information technology as their power base and promoting women as their partners, we must go back to Harun, who did the same when he decided to invest in the paper industry to launch Islam as a communication-powered civilization whose main weapon was the Arabic language. Just as today, Arabs were scientifically backward in the eighth century, but their switch to communication enabled them to catch up with other nations by using language to navigate and conduct dialogue. Arabic, the language of illiterate pagans, was transformed into a medium of religion, the law, and sciences, promoting the Arabs to global prominence.

Are we witnessing once again the emergence of women as brainy allies when men opt for communication as their power base? Just to make sure you do not take me to be blindly optimistic, let me tell you that Western television companies such as the BBC and CBC are worried about competition in the United States from Al Jazeera, which has decided to launch an English language channel. As a woman, I will be more than thrilled if the competition between East and West switches from bombs and armies to communication strategies. ■