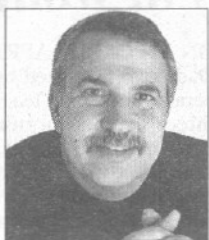


It's all about schools



By Thomas L. Friedman

By rebuilding Yemen's educational system, the West could prevent the country from becoming an Al Qaeda breeding ground

I took part in a "qat chew" the other day at the home of a Yemeni official. Never done that before. Qat is the mildly hallucinogenic leaf drug that Yemeni men stuff in their cheek after work — and sometimes during. My hosts insisted that qat actually makes your senses sharper and that you could chew and chisel the top of a mosque minaret at the same time. I quit after 15 minutes, but the Yemeni officials, lawmakers and businessmen I was with chewed on for three hours — and they made a lot of sense along the way.

Most had been educated in America or had kids studying there, and they were all bemoaning how the decline of the Yemeni education system, the proliferation of exclusively religious schools here and the falloff in scholarships for Yemeni kids to study in America were producing a very different Yemeni generation than their own. They spoke fondly of US schools that were based on merit, taught them to think freely and prepared them with the skills to thrive.

So here is my new rule of thumb: For every Predator missile we fire at an Al Qaeda target here, we should help Yemen build 50 new modern schools that teach science and math and critical thinking — to boys and girls.

If we stick to something close to that ratio of targeted killings to targeted kindergartens, we have a chance to prevent Yemen from becoming an Al Qaeda breeding ground. Because right now there are some 300,000 college-educated Yemenis out of work — partly because of poor training and partly because there are no jobs — 15,000 schoolchildren not attending any classes, 65 percent of teachers with only high school degrees and thousands of kids learning little more than religious doctrines.

sary to train the right labour force — skills like problem-solving, communication, critical thinking, debate, organisation and teamwork." America's last great ideological foe, Soviet Marxism, produced its share of violent radicals, but it also produced Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn — because it believed in science, physics, math and the classics of literature. Islamism is not producing any Sakharovs.

May Yamani, the author and daughter of the former Saudi oil minister Ahmad Zaki Yamani, minced no words, writing in *The Beirut Daily Star*: "Saudi Arabia exported both its Wahabism and Al Qaeda to Yemen by funding thousands of madrassas, where fanaticism is taught." Ahmed Sofan, a Yemeni parliamentarian, told me that back in the 1970s if you visited a village in his rural constituency, most of the women would be unveiled and working alongside the men. No more, he said, "because we now have this Wahabi sense of religious conservatism where

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Added Abdul Karim al-Iryani, a former prime minister: Growing up, "we studied Darwinism in my high school without challenge." Not anymore. "The East Asian miracle," he added, "wasn't possible without women. In the Arab world, if half our society is excluded, how will we ever catch up with those new tigers?"

man religious doctrines.

And no wonder. Beginning in the 1970s, the trend in Yemen, Morocco, Egypt and the Persian Gulf "was to Islamicise education as a way to fight the left and pro-communists — with the blessing of the US", explained Lahcen Haddad, a professor at the University of Rabat in Morocco and an expert on governance with Management Systems International, a US development contractor. Then, in 1979, after the Saudi ruling family was shaken by an attack in Makkah from its own Wahabi fundamentalists, the Saudi regime, to fend off the anger of its Wahabis, "gave them free rein to Islamicise education and social life in Saudi Arabia and neighbouring states."

Small, economically deprived Yemen was an easy target. Uncritically accepting of the "truths" of Wahabism became the core curriculum in many Yemeni schools, Haddad added, and "it destroyed the opportunity to build the basic skills neces-

those new figures.

The Yemeni journalist Mohammed al-Qadhi reported in The National newspaper that there may be 10,000 religious-based schools educating Yemeni youth today. He quoted a top Yemeni education official as saying, "We are now obliging these schools to teach moderation to protect our students against extremism." In other words, we are now fighting for the Middle East of the 2020s and 2030s. Huge chunks of this generation are lost. When I went to see Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, at his Sana palace, he was in a reflective mood: "I would wish that this arms race could end and instead we could have a race for development." It is the only way Yemen will have a future. So, yes, fire those Predators where we must, but help build schools and fund scholarships to America wherever we can. And please, please, let's end our addiction to oil. COURTESY THE NEW YORK TIMES