

## 'God, King and Slave'

**Bringing entrepreneurship to the Arab world involves some radical culture change. The women are getting it, says MIT guru Ken Morse.**

By **Stefan Theil** | NEWSWEEK  
Published Aug 10, 2007  
Aug. 20-27, 2007 issue

Start-up guru Ken Morse has been spending one third of his time in the Middle East since 1999. As director of the Entrepreneurship Center at MIT, he's been deeply involved advising Arab leaders in how to jump-start high-tech entrepreneurship in the region. The goal: diversify Arab economies away from oil and public service, and create quality jobs for the youth. He is also helping some of the region's leading universities introduce entrepreneurship training into their curricula. He spoke with NEWSWEEK's Stefan Theil. Excerpts:

**NEWSWEEK: You've been spending one third of your time in the Middle East for the past seven years. What's changed since you first arrived?**

**Ken Morse:** Most government leaders have understood that the entrepreneurial virus has to take hold. They see the demographics and the economic growth they need to create jobs for their young people, and those numbers are hairy and scary. They also see that entrepreneurs and smaller businesses create a disproportionately high number of jobs. Tech start-ups are high value—the local market is not enough to support growth, so they're forced to go global, which is good for integrating the region's economy.

**What obstacles are you dealing with?**

There is still a lot of poor education. The region's mind-set is risk-averse, there is a huge fear of failure. Fail, and you lose your face. Yet trying and failing is usually the way an entrepreneur learns.

**In a nutshell, how does one teach entrepreneurship?**

We take our professors to the region. We bring aspiring entrepreneurs here to build their networks and immerse themselves in the entrepreneurial ecosystem at MIT and along Route 128, and we keep in touch with them over the years. We've created the MIT Enterprise Forum for the Pan-Arab Region, which in its first year became the largest business plan competition in the world. We take the huge idea of starting a business and cut it down into small pieces. We teach how to build a global business from the start, instead of going only for the smaller

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regional market. We celebrate the heroes, including the people who tried and failed. Entrepreneurship is a message of hope—I can fulfill my full potential if I do my own business.

**Many of the most promising entrepreneurs in the region seem to be women.**

In Lebanon or Syria, one third of the start-up CEOs are women. At the Higher College of Technology in the U.A.E., where we hold our entrepreneurship master classes, over 60 percent of the students are women. In Saudi Arabia, there are very impressive all-women software companies. In our business-plan competitions, many of the best teams are run by women. Many of the people organizing young entrepreneurs' associations and business-plan competitions are women.

**Why?**

Women understand that entrepreneurship is completely gender-blind. If you don't want a glass ceiling, build your own company. Women also work harder than men, they're more diligent and responsible, and more willing to go for it. Any time a woman has a good job it's good for the next generation, because they will make sure their daughters are going to be well-educated. In parts of the region, leaders understand that and are focusing their entrepreneurship programs on women. In the Netherlands, by the way, I have taught an entrepreneurship workshop to CEOs with not a woman among them. That would not happen in the Middle East.

**There's a political angle to promoting entrepreneurship in the Middle East.**

High-tech firms will be at the cutting edge of social change. They tie the region into the global economy, which is good for stability. Every job there creates two or three others, and these people will likely be conservative rather than radical. You build a middle class, you build middle-class values.

**You're a serial entrepreneur yourself. What's your bottom-line advice?**

The entrepreneur has to create like a god, command like a king and work like a slave.

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