

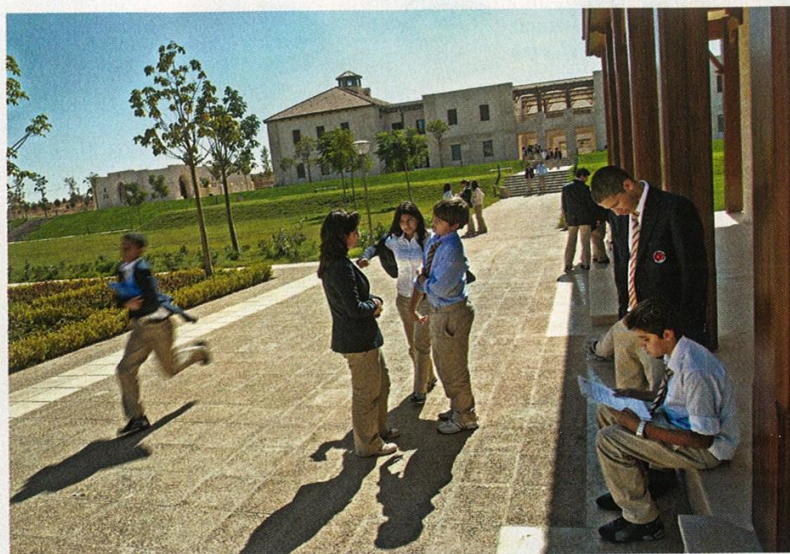
## Postcard: Jordan. King Abdullah II has opened an ambitious new academy modeled on the New England boarding school he attended. Can Arab preppies save the Middle East?

BY ANDREW LEE BUTTERS/MADABA

**I**N 1977 AN UNLIKELY NEW 10TH-grader arrived on the campus of Deerfield Academy in western Massachusetts. He was Abdullah ibn Hussein, direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and scion of the Hashemite dynasty, the onetime princes of Mecca and currently the ruling family of the kingdom of Jordan. Now known as His Majesty King Abdullah II, he points to the years spent as a member of the academy's class of 1980 as the most formative of his life. Deerfield introduced Abdullah to a much broader range of friends than is normally available to young Arab princes, and the character-building crucible of dormitory life taught him Yankee egalitarianism, self-reliance and how to clear dishes from the dinner table.

After he ascended to the throne in 1999, the King wanted to bring these values to Jordan. His plan: create the Arab world's first coed boarding school. In 2006 he brought in Deerfield's headmaster, Eric Widmer, and several other Deerfield teachers to kick-start King's Academy, which opened this fall with about 100 students.

But what can preppies bring to the semidesert kingdom? Some of the evidence is already on display at the campus, near Madaba, a farming town about 30 miles (48 km) south of Amman, Jordan's capital. Yes, there are boarding-school staples like family-style meals at round tables, school-wide meetings, blue blazers and khaki pants. There's also the rather revolutionary belief that the classroom should be an intimate place that fosters discussion and critical thinking rather than rote memorization, which is the default teaching method in much of the region. But more important is the school's effort to create an environment



A model school? King's Academy focuses on turning its students into leaders

where learning takes place outside the classroom—through athletics, community service, honor codes and an expectation that students become leaders in everyday life. The school also plans to bring a new diversity to campus. The current class members come from countries across the Middle East, but although there are no Westerners now, the school hopes to eventually attract students from the U.S.—or even Israel—and about one-third of the student body will receive financial aid.

This is a far cry from most elite high schools in Jordan today, which are more like an Arab *Beverly Hills 90210*—wealthy kids leading insular lives.

Not that the academy is keen to be just a carbon copy of a New England prep school. The campus's Levantine-style white stone buildings—and the tight security at its main gate—remind visitors that they're not in Massachusetts anymore. Arabic-language classes are mandatory, and humanities courses, though taught in English, draw on the canonical works of many civilizations.

Anticipating the difficulty of persuad-

ing parents in this conservative society to send their children away to school, the academy set strict rules governing relations between boys and girls: no kissing, no holding hands and no visiting one another's dorms.

But perhaps the biggest challenge facing the academy is beyond the control of even the most committed faculty member or enlightened royal patron: the ever turbulent Middle East. As King Abdullah likes to say, Jordan is a country caught between "Iraq and a hard place"—i.e., Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. As much as the King would like to reform education using his flagship academy, there are more pressing problems, like the flood of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees pouring into Jordan. In such a heated environment, can an American-model school thrive? Safwan Masri, the Jordanian chairman of the academy's board of trustees and a professor at Columbia Business School, is optimistic. "The one thing that almost everyone in the Middle East respects is American education," he says. "The fact that this is a troubled region makes the case for this kind of school even stronger." ■

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