

# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

December 12, 2003

## **Security in Saudi Arabia and the Prospects for Political Reform**

Khaled al-Maena, Editor in Chief of *Arab News*  
at the Middle East Institute

### **Editor's Note:**

The *Saudi-American Forum* would like to thank the Middle East Institute (MEI) for permission to share Mr. Al-Maena's presentation summary with our readers. Khaled Al-Maena, editor in chief of *Arab News*, spoke on "Security in Saudi Arabia and the Prospects for Political Reform." Hesham Sallam of the MEI Language Department wrote this brief about Mr. Al-Maena's speech.

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### **Summary:**

December 3, 2003 (Washington, DC) - Khaled al-Maena, editor in chief of *Arab News*, examined the origin and the future of political and social reform in Saudi Arabia following the 'wake-up call' signaled by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. While the prospects for reform remain high, al-Maena warned of the obstacles that might hinder change, particularly the barriers set by conservative social forces, and by external criticism.

### **Brief:**

September 11<sup>th</sup> was an impetus that galvanized people for change in Saudi Arabia. Al-Maena argued that the attack-perpetrated by 19 hijackers including 15 Saudi nationals-prompted Saudi society to examine the social factors that led to such a tragic incident. Saudi Arabia will enter a stormy phase in the coming years, as it decides upon what path of change to pursue. Saudi Arabia once enjoyed a culture virtually free of domestic violence and crime. At the present time, there is wide consensus among Saudis on the necessity of reform to overcome the negative social aspects that have emerged. However there are considerable divisions on the pace and methods through which change should be attained.

Al-Maena described some of the promising features of the domestic scene in Saudi Arabia. Middle-class society, along with the press, is discussing issues that were never addressed before on the public arena such as accountability, corruption, democratization, female empowerment, and the role of youth. Such encouraging prospects are obstructed by advocates of the status quo and leaders of the conservative front who fear that change would compromise society's commitment to sacred Islamic values and morals. On the positive side, al-Maena hails leaders of those competing schools of thought which are engaged in an open dialogue- aided by satellite

media which brought significant, controversial issues to the forefront of public discussions. The Saudi people are starting to reject their role as spectators of the Saudi political process, and starting to demand a role as engaged, responsible citizens. The government has responded to this ongoing movement for more openness, al-Maeena explains, by a recently announced plan to hold municipal elections.

Women's rights, he indicated, are an important focus of the contemporary debates in the Saudi society. The exclusion of women from political life has led to the condemnation of the Muslim world in the eyes of the international community over the past decades. Another significant component to this debate concerns the growing consciousness in Saudi Arabia of the need to revise the content of public school textbooks. This awareness developed not in response to U.S. pressure but out of a sincere desire for progress, and a sense of regret that Islamic extremism encouraged Saudis to join the anti-Soviet resistance movement in Afghanistan.

The Saudis reacted to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks events with shock and horror, contrary to what he described as a misleading image conveyed by U.S. media outlets. September 11<sup>th</sup> was a wake up call for the Saudi people, who were aware of the need for reform in their country well before the beginning of recent terrorist attacks on the Kingdom's soil.

In his concluding remarks, al-Maeena stressed that reform in Saudi Arabia should not remain ink on paper, but must materialize into a set of real changes that responds to the needs of the people. In order to achieve any change, Saudi Arabia also needs a receptive audience outside the Kingdom that does not hinder the process of reform by unfairly characterizing Saudi society and culture.

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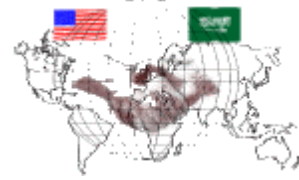
## **ABOUT THE SPEAKER**

**Khalid Al-Maeena** has been the Editor-in-Chief of *Arab News*, the largest English daily in the Middle East, for over fifteen years. He first joined the newspaper as Editor-in-Chief from June 1982 to February 1993 and rejoined as of March 1, 1998. He was an anchor on Saudi Television (STV) and hosted popular talk shows. He has also worked as a radio announcer and TV program director. Mr. Al-Maeena joined Saudi Arabian Airlines (Saudia), the national carrier of Saudi Arabia, in 1972. He has worked in Saudia in various capacities including public relations advisor to the airline and Editor-in-Chief of Saudia World.

For more speaker information, visit: <http://www.arabview.com/profiles.asp?author=2>

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