

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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Conference at Cal State San Bernardino Better Understanding between Saudis and Americans

By Alan Llavore
California State University, San Bernardino

Editor's Note:

The Saudi-American Forum wishes to thank Mr. Llavore for providing this report on the CSUSB conference. We also wish to thank Ms. Mary Morris for her summary of the conference discussions and her paper presented at the conference, "*At a Crossroads: American Policy and the Middle East.*"

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By Alan Llavore, California State University, San Bernardino

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif. – It seemed fitting that a university campus was the site of a conference where the goal was to open a dialogue and increase understanding at a personal level between two countries.

California State University, San Bernardino welcomed a delegation of 19 educators and dignitaries from King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 21-23. Joining them were educators, administrators and students from Cal State San Bernardino and other institutions for a joint conference, "United States-Saudi Arabian Relations in Light of the Current International Crisis."

"I think it's important to recognize that we're holding this conference in an academic setting," said John Conley, dean of CSUSB's College of Social and Behavior Sciences, which organized the conference. "The reason is that it provides an opportunity for open and reasoned discussion, with a critical eye on issues."

Said CSUSB President Albert K. Karnig: "We're really hopeful that this conference and others like it will offer us all an opportunity to learn more about one another."

Though the issues discussed – terrorism, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, women's rights, education reform, religious and cultural difference – had the potential to be points of conflict, reasoned discussion and illumination did take place on both sides during the panel presentations on Jan. 22, the centerpiece event of the Saudi delegations' visit, as well as during other events. More than 900 students, faculty, staff and visitors to the university attended the presentations.

Delegates also visited classes and met with faculty during their stay.

By way of background, panelists reminded the audience that Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country. The kingdom, as it is constituted now, was formed in 1932. It is also the birthplace of Islam and is home to Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. Its public education system was established in the early 1950s, and only boys were allowed to attend school. It wasn't until 1960 that girls were allowed to attend formal classes. While many Americans have focused their attention on Saudi Arabia since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S., or have associated it with oil, the kingdom's relations with the United States date back several decades and go beyond oil.

Lost in the political debate portrayed in the American news media – and therefore the minds of most Americans– is that the bond between the two countries strengthened during the U.S. cold war with the now-dismantled Soviet Union. The relationship was such that Saudi Arabia and the U.S. had closer ties than the U.S. had with its European allies, said Professor Othman Al-Rawaf, a member of the Saudi delegation and a political scientist. It was a relationship that went beyond the concern over the Soviet threat to the Middle East, he said. Also, Saudi Arabia has been a strong moderate voice in the region, making it a leader in the Arab world, able to be a force in forging joint agreements with its neighboring states, Al-Rawaf said.

William Green, a political science professor at CSUSB, said tensions between the two countries have developed and increased, most notably in recent years as the U.S. military presence in the Arab region has grown, especially with the war against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003. In regards to U.S. foreign policy in that region, Green said, "We [Americans] have to understand that even if we intervene in an other country with the best of motive ... that we are doing this for the best of everybody involved, people on the ground in that region are not going to like us being there. Even if they understand why we are there, they don't like the fact that outsiders are coming in to resolve their affairs."

Sounding a similar caution in a later panel presentation that focused on culture, religion and society in Saudi Arabia, Selwa Al-Hazaa said that if any change, if any true reforms are to take place, they have to come from within the Saudi society – not from the outside. Al-Hazaa, who heads what is called the most prestigious ophthalmology clinic in Riyadh, reminded the audience that Saudi Arabia is a young country compared to the U.S. In regards to women's rights, it is wrong for people to expect Saudi women to achieve the same level of independence in her home country in a rapid fashion when it took generations for American women to do the same. And outside influences should not be used, Al-Hazaa said. Cultural and religious matters must be considered that outsiders either don't know of or don't value – and Al-Hazaa and other Saudi panelists said their home culture is very religious and very conservative compared to the west.

"People will make the change," she said. "But it has to be our own change. It has to be within us that we have to make the change, not some external force. If you force reform, it isn't reform anymore."

The conference was a continuation of CSUSB's activities in the region initiated by political science professor Ralph Salmi and fully supported by Karnig, Conley and Louis Fernandez,

university provost and vice president. It was the result of a relationship developed and outlined in a memorandum of agreement signed June 2000 on the CSUSB campus between Karnig, Saudi Arabian Minister of Higher Education Dr. Khalid Al-Angary and King Saud University President Dr. Abdullah Faisal.

Cal State San Bernardino has taken a leadership role within the 23-campus California State University system, the largest public higher education system in the U.S., with regards to programs increasing understanding of the Middle East, including one of the few programs offering Arabic languages. In addition to its partnerships with King Saud University and other institutions in Saudi Arabia, it has also forged educational partnerships and exchanges with universities in Turkey, including the hosting of a symposium in November 2003 with Gazi University. And more programs are being developed as a result of those partnerships and the desire to forge better understanding between Americans and other countries, Conley said.

“The communication and understanding that we talked about all day long is a two-way street,” Conley said in closing the Jan. 22 panel presentations. Referring to Americans, he said, “It is as much our responsibility as it the countries in the Middle East.”

ABOUT THE SAUDI-AMERICAN FORUM

The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues - - impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.



The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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