

Conference Summary

**National Conference on U.S.–Saudi Arabia Relations
October 21–22, University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A.**

**Sponsors: Wang Yu-Fa Foundation and Asian Programs, University of
Indianapolis (UIndy)**

Cochairs: Dr. Winberg Chai and Dr. Phylis Lan Lin

President Chai, honorable _____, and distinguished guests:

Introduction

It was my great honor and pleasure to cochair the First National Conference on U.S.–Saudi Arabia Relations, which was held at the University of Indianapolis (UIndy) on October 21–22, 2011. I would like to take the opportunity to share with you the summary of the first conference.

About 100 participants attended the two-day conference, which was cosponsored and co-organized by the Wang Yu-Fa Foundation and the University of Indianapolis’s Asian Programs in Indianapolis, Indiana. Faculty and students (both American and Saudi Arabian) from UIndy, IUPUIESL, Internexus (ESL); scholars from Missouri and Washington, DC; and community leaders were among the participants. The presenters were educators from the University of Indianapolis; the University of Wyoming; Thunderbird Graduate School of International Studies, Arizona; Governors State University, Illinois; Internexus (ESL); IUPUI ESL Program; and the International School of Indiana. The conference aimed to increase understanding and awareness about the background and the current state of U.S.–Saudi Arabia relations by bringing together scholars and participants from different universities and from many states across America.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ruled by the Al Saud family since its founding in 1932, has become one of the largest economies in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia remained the largest U.S. trading partner in the Middle East in 2010. The Saudi government has been an important regional partner to the United States. The U.S. arms sales and related training programs have continued with congressional oversight (Congressional Research Service, “Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations,” March 10, 2011, report). The rapid national and social developments of Saudi Arabia cover many fields, such as green energy, emerging technologies, information technology, public health, transportation, and infrastructure. Most of all, the country’s educational reform has affected not only on human capital but also on gender equality. Gary Locke, former secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce, pointed out at a forum on

U.S.–Saudi Arabia business opportunities in 2011 that “Today, Saudi Arabia is taking unprecedented steps to expand and diversify its economy into knowledge-based industries.” Unfortunately, the average American does not have a full picture of how strategic the alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia is and how much the educational reform and the economic boom have transform Saudi Arabia into a modern society where both new and old cultures can be witnessed hand in hand. The purpose of the conference was to encourage dialogue about U.S.–Saudi Arabia relations and to enhance our understanding of how the Kingdom has made the best use of its wealth from its oil reserves and oil exports to its country’s social and educational development.

The conference began with a reception, hosted by the conference cochairs, Dr. Winberg Chai, President of Wa Yu-Fa Foundation, and Dr. Phylis Lan Lin, Associate Vice President of International Partnerships and the Director of Asian Programs, University of Indianapolis. The reception was held in the Board of Trustees Dining Room at UIndy on the evening of October 21. A total of 26 guests, including keynote speakers, out-of-state guests, community leaders, and faculty and administrators of the university, attended the reception.

The Opening

The conference program started at 9 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m. on October 22. As the cochair and the co-organizer of the conference, I had the privilege to welcome the participants to this First National Conference on U.S.–Saudi Arabia Relations. I acknowledged that UIndy has many ties that promote cultural exchange and understanding between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States and the State of Indiana. The university has many Saudi students, and the University of Indianapolis Press published a modern reader on Saudi Arabia in 2005. The book was edited by Dr. Winberg Chai. The university Asian Programs has hosted several Saudi–Chinese student coffee hours to enhance the interaction between students from Saudi Arabia and China. It was interesting to note that at one coffee hour, I asked Saudi students the location of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and they said, “In Asia.” I then, asked the same question about the location of China to the Chinese students, who replied, “In Asia.” So I said, “Great, then we are all in the family!” At our university, we embrace all international students but with a special focus on students from Asia.

Our branch campus in Greece, University of Indianapolis–Athens, has a joint program in Executive MBA with the Yanbu Industrial College in Yanbu Al-Siniayah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There are plans for our university to continue to seek collaborations with universities in Saudi Arabia and to welcome Saudi students, both males and females, to study on our main campus in Indianapolis.

UIndy is very proud to have had the opportunity to host the conference and to provide a bridge to facilitate our understanding of the United States and Saudi Arabia’s long history of peaceful cooperation that began in the 1930s with the founding of the modern state known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Winberg Chai, President of the Wang Yu-Fa Foundation and the most prominent Chinese-American scholar on China and Middle Eastern studies, opened the conference with his welcome remarks. Dr. Chai thanked Dr. Phylis Lan Lin; Dr. Mary Moore, University of Indianapolis's Vice President for Research, Planning and International Partnerships; and UIndy for cohosting the conference. He then welcomed a number of special participants who are renowned in their respective fields and who traveled some distance to attend the conference. Dr. Chai then introduced speakers (Dr. Marianne Kamp, Dr. Michael Brose, Dr. Martin Sours, and Dr. Roger K. Oden) for the morning session and expressed his wish that the conference would help Americans to learn more about Saudi Arabia in the interests of promoting peace. He noted that the United States has been involved in a number of wars and conflicts in the Middle East for many years now and that he hopes that this pattern will end and the United States in the years ahead will instead be involved in peaceful activities. Finally, Dr. Chai emphasized that the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is mutually beneficial and should not be disrupted by special-interest groups.

Dr. Moore also brought a welcome message from the University of Indianapolis. She spoke about why this national conference was important to the university's strategy of maintaining strong international partnerships. The greatest challenge to international partnering comes from the continued need for knowledge about partner sites. She noted that the University of Indianapolis partners extensively with international sites, including a branch campus in Athens, two degree sites in China, and one degree site in Belize, with multiple sister-school relations around the world. This conference was highlighted as an important step in increasing the university's knowledge about Saudi Arabia as a potential partner. With the inclusion of students from Saudi Arabia to the Indianapolis campus and the partnering through the University of Indianapolis–Athens with a higher-education institution in Saudi Arabia, the need for greater understanding was seen as pressing.

The Morning Session: An American Conversation: Why the United States Needs Saudi Arabia

The morning session provided historical background on economic, political, strategic/military, and educational relations. Dr. Marianne Kamp, one of the most renowned scholars on Middle East studies, concisely and clearly reviewed the history of Saudi Arabia from 1945 to 1991—through the inception of the Saudi Arabian state and into the emergence and growth of Saudi Arabia's oil sector and the involvement of the United States. Continuing the momentum for the second presentation, Dr. Martin Sour, Professor of Global Business Emeritus, the Thunderbird School of Global Management, and his colleague Dr. Robert Guffin gave an interesting military perspective on past and present U.S.–Saudi Arabia operations. Their explanation of the strategic alignment that naturally happened between the anti-Communist ideology of the United States and the anti-Communism of the theocracy of Saudi Arabia during the post–World War II era was superb. Although it is commonly known that the United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia hinges on the exchange of oil for security, this second

presentation and the conference as a whole undoubtedly shed light on several other important aspects of our relationship. In the third and fourth presentations, Dr. Roger Oden, President of the Third World Conference Foundation of Chicago, covered the need for strong economic ties with Saudi Arabia, and Dr. Winberg Chai, based on his discontent with trends in the U.S. higher-educational system, stressed how the U.S. government should now, in turn, follow Saudi Arabia's current policies and put more money into education.

The above four presentations (papers) were included in *Why the U.S. Needs Saudi Arabia*, edited by Winberg Chai, published by the University of Indianapolis, 2011. The book was distributed at the conference to all participants. These four papers are listed below:

1. "U.S.–Saudi Relations to 1991: Oil and Security" by Michael Brose & Marianne Kamp
2. "U.S.–Saudi Arabia Political and Military Relations: The Importance and Centrality of the U.S.–Saudi Partnership in the Post-Global World" by Martin H. Sours
3. "Why the U.S. Needs Strong Economic Ties with Saudi Arabia" by Roger K. Oden
4. "What the U.S. Can Learn from Saudi Education" by Winberg Chai

A recent review by the Midwest Book Review acknowledged, "Saudi Arabia is more than a source of oil of the United States. *Why the U.S. Needs Saudi Arabia* discusses American and Saudi Arabian relations, stating that America needs Saudi Arabia's assistance in its international affairs and trade. Winberg Chai is a scholar with a focus on Saudi Arabia and offers a unique perspective on this partnership that has been both celebrated and denounced. *Why the U.S. Needs Saudi Arabia* is a fine pick for those studying international affairs, highly recommended."

Discussion

Dr. Milind Thakar, the discussant for the morning session, pointed out that "the conference theme is an interesting subject—one that examines a relationship long taken for granted by most observers of international relations. The U.S.–Saudi relationship has existed for several decades and is now the fulcrum of U.S.–Arab policy, a given around which other policies are framed." Dr. Thakar had reviewed the papers presented by the participants and heard them with much interest. In the interest of brevity, he posed the following questions to the presenters to explore further the questions that they have raised. Dr. Thakar began his discussion by addressing the conference organizers and put forth an existentialist question—namely, "What is the rationale of the book that was published in conjunction with the conference, *Why the U.S. Needs Saudi Arabia*? The framing of the title of the conference suggests that it is in response to a question about the U.S.–Saudi tie. Who questions this tie? Is there a body of literature that seeks to disparage this relationship? If so, it must be made somewhat clearer to drive home the point why this relationship is of tremendous strategic use to the United States." Dr. Thakar moved on to

discuss the morning presentations. Here is an excerpt of Dr. Thakar’s comments to the morning-session speakers:

To Michael Brose and Marianne Kamp, first of all, I must commend you on distilling a half-century narrative into a condensed chapter that lays out the development of the U.S.–Saudi relationship historically. A follow-up question: How do you rank the two concerns—oil and security? Which figures more prominently in the U.S. strategic map, and why? Is there a possibility that the U.S. might find these concerns of less relevance in the future? For Martin Sours, thank you for a very interesting exposition of this strategic relationship in a globalized era. I am curious though, whether you would characterize the U.S. relationship with an undemocratic regime in the best long-term interests of the country? If so, what reasons may be advanced for doing so? Also, does this lead us to the idea that the U.S. might reconsider its relationship with Iran, also undemocratic, but a potentially important regional player?

Finally, as an academic, I applaud Dr. Chai’s litany of grievances about the current state of U.S. education. I am curious about how and what the U.S. can “learn” from Saudi education. What Saudi Arabia is planning to do appears to be more aptly titled the comprehensive Western European approach—or if this is a specifically Saudi idea, mention must be made of it clearly. In any debate about the U.S. learning from Saudi Arabia, one must beg the question of whether nontechnical education—in the liberal arts and social sciences—is of any use without academic freedom. Is this a concern in Saudi Arabia, or has the government allowed a different policy in academia?

The Lunch Break

Presenters and participants alike facilitated to make this conference a success. It was evident that this objective was preliminarily accomplished during the lunch break, as Saudis and Americans intermingled throughout the room and engaged in lively discussions. After a formal gourmet lunch buffet prepared by Polk Food Service, the second session transitioned into presentations and conversations about global education competence. The session was chaired by Dr. Phylis Lan Lin.

The Afternoon Session: An International Conversation on Global Education

The afternoon session started with a presentation on K–12 education for the global knowledge economy. Presenter Cathy Blitzer, Vice President for Development and External Relations, International School of Indiana, used the International School of Indiana, as well as other programs, to discuss “Education for Global Competence: Examples of World-Class Programs.” Following is an excerpt of Blitzer’s presentation:

Education, civic, and business leaders agree that new sets of skills are needed for the global knowledge economy:

- The ability to act independently and solve problems on their own
- Strong interpersonal written, oral, and social skills to collaborate with colleagues
- Strong global literacy to understand people around the world
- The ability to acquire the information they need to do the job
- The ability to learn new skills as corporations change strategies to stay competitive.

Schools, teachers, and curricula will transform to achieve these outcomes. Schools will go from buildings to “nerve centers” connecting teachers, students, and the community to the wealth of knowledge that exists in the world. Teachers will become orchestrators of learning to help students turn information into knowledge. The 21st-century curriculum is interdisciplinary, project-based, and research driven. It incorporates higher thinking skills, multiple intelligences, technology, and multimedia. High-performing systems in South Korea, Finland, and Singapore, as measured by scores on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), emphasize:

- Lifelong learning
- High value on education in the society
- Schools as knowledge organizations and catalysts for learning and discovery

Internationally, the International Baccalaureate Organization provides three programs for students aged 3 to 19 to help develop the intellectual, personal, emotional, and social skills to live, learn, and work in a rapidly globalizing world. There are more than 970,000 IB students at 3,290 schools in 141 countries. The Diploma Programme, last two years of high school, provides students with a globally recognized university entrance qualification. Worldwide, the average for passing scores on the IB Diploma Exam is 79%; in the Americas (Canada, U.S., Mexico, and Central and South America), it is 70%.

Education is at the forefront of political debate, and reformers are drawing examples of good practice from all over the world. In the U.S., a number of high schools are leading the way in teaching Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) subjects, and *U.S. News and World Report* now ranks best high schools for math and science in response to industry’s dire workforce needs. Practices in education reform that steeply improving countries have in common include:

- Funding schools adequately and equitably
- Revising national standards and curricula to focus learning goals on higher-order thinking, inquiry, and innovation
- Integrated technology throughout the curriculum
- Developed national teaching policies that build strong teacher-education programs
- Pursued consistent, long-term reforms to expand, equalize, and improve

Blitzer concluded her presentation by quoting a question addressed by Sir Ken Robinson: “How do we prepare students for jobs that don’t yet exist and get them excited about industries not yet invented?” (<http://edudemic.com/2011/10/students-of-the-future/>).

Moving from the issues on K–12 education, the next panel discussion focused on “The King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program and Its Implication for Saudi–U.S. Partnership in Higher Education.” As the session chair, I pointed out that according to the Institute of International Education (2010), in the 2009–2010 school year, there were over 15,000 Saudi students studying in U.S. institutions, a 25% increase over the previous school year. With the influx of students from Saudi Arabia, and given the recent King Abdullah Foreign Scholar Program, there is a likelihood of even more Saudi students on American campuses in coming years. It is therefore imperative for universities in America to develop ways of working more closely with these students to help them fulfill their particular academic, social, and cultural needs. It is also imperative to view the education of Saudi students within the broader context of other U.S. institutions of higher education that benefit immensely from including Saudi students among their student population. Saudi students do more than merely increase international student enrollment numbers; they enhance campus diversity, help to break through cultural stereotypes, and lend a non-Western perspective to course discussions and assignments.

Session panelists were Dr. Karen Newman (ESL Instructor and University of Indianapolis Adjunct Faculty), Adele Tyson (Center Director of Interglobal Indiana), Joshua Simpson (International Student Advisor, IUPUI), and Mary Moore (VP for Research, Planning and International Partnerships, University of Indianapolis). The panelists addressed the issues related to students’ English proficiency levels and needs, cultural adjustment issues, American students’ misperceptions of Saudi students, and strategies for increasing Saudi and American interaction. The differences in students’ learning styles and patterns, the frequency of student and faculty interaction, and the classroom culture between the Saudi (Middle Eastern) and American (Western) learning systems and expectations were discussed. Saudi students who participated in the conference were actively engaged in the dialogue exchange with the panelists. Saudi students’ input and the open discussion with the panelists assisted participants’ understanding of the difference between the cultural and religious practices of the Saudis and of the pedagogical issues involved in working with Saudi students. The discussions enhanced Americans’ awareness of stereotyping of the Saudi people. I am pleased to conclude that at this conference, educators from the K–12 level as well as college and university level were able to exchange information

about their work experience with and research about U.S. and Saudi students and educational opportunities to learn about both cultures. The many college students who attended the conference were able to learn a new perspective about U.S.–Saudi Arabian relations and to mingle with the invited experts to ask questions and continue the discussion informally.

The King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program started in 1995 and is but one of the facets of the Saudi government’s endeavor to recognize the importance of the role of education for economic and social developments. The Saudi government (the Ministry of Education) has acknowledged the urgency of promoting a knowledge-based economy (or “the third industrial revolution,” as it was termed by the *Economist Special Report* in its April 21, 2012, issue, page 15) by taking action in education reform at all levels, especially in higher education. The Saudi government not only invested billions of dollars in state-of-the-art modern infrastructure for the higher education campuses but also sees higher-education institutions as the best incubators for the knowledge-based labor force and also for Saudi society to promote the concept and social policy of gender equality in Saudi, a society that embraces both traditional and modernizing characteristics in the 21st century. Today, women comprise close to 60% of Saudi Arabia’s college students, and more and more successful women professionals have been recognized in public, yet overall, women remain underrepresented in Saudi’s labor force and in the political arena.

Epilogue

All conference participants agreed that the discussion on this important global relationship was only just beginning. Many participants expressed interest in a follow-up conference to explore more topics that had come up in the question-and-answer sessions and in the informal discussions after the panel presentations. Participants expressed interest in learning more about Saudi culture, including women’s educational achievements and the changing role of women in Saudi society, as well as the possibility for future collaborations between Saudi and U.S. universities and businesses.

On behalf of the First National Conference on U.S.–Saudi Arabia Relations, I would like to once again express our thanks to speakers for their insightful analyses of the subject and our heartfelt gratitude for the sponsorship from the Wang Yu-Fa Foundation. I give special thanks to May-lee Chai, Executive Director of Wang Yu-Fa Foundation, for her insightful suggestions for the preparation of the conference. Finally, we extend our thanks to Dr. Winberg Chai for his leadership, vision, commitment, and passion in making this conference a success.

Thank you

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