



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## “Saudi Arabia: The New Dynamics”

Middle East Institute

1761 N Street NW

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The Middle East Institute hosted a lecture by **Thomas Lippman** entitled “Saudi Arabia: The New Dynamics.” Lippman, who has been traveling to Saudi Arabia for over thirty years, recently returned from a month-long trip to the desert kingdom. While Lippman admitted there have been some “really bad books” written about Saudi Arabian history since September 11<sup>th</sup>, he is currently writing a new book that will focus on the country’s future.

According to Lippman, Saudi Arabia is a “quite dynamic” country that currently is facing difficulties building a safe, secure, and prosperous future. Luckily, it just may have the resources, skills, and capable people to overcome its challenges. The stereotypical picture of oil and veiled women is not only inadequate but “almost ludicrous.” In reality, Saudi Arabia has a very complicated and interesting society that is difficult for outsiders to understand. Currently, Saudi Arabia is undergoing important economic, social, educational, health, and even religious changes.

However, **Lippman observed no political change, nor any indication that the people want any change.** They are happy with the King and the senior Princes running the country. While citizens now enjoy more forums and channels to voice their concerns, ultimately the decisions of the Saud family prevail. Lippman cited the de facto constitution delineated by King Fahd which outlines the obligations of the citizenry, but does not include the responsibilities of the monarch. Despite the lack of political change, Lippman asserted Saudi Arabia is transforming in “positive and beneficial ways.”

In the private sector, currently 46% of the GDP is private and continues to grow. Despite the growing economy in manufacturing, retail, agriculture and food processing, and even tourism sectors, unemployment remains a problem. Often Saudi-owned businesses do not hire Saudi employees despite government pressure. Among other reasons, Lippman observed Saudis tend to have an exaggerated sense of their own market value, despite their lacking education system.

However, as King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) shows, the government is seeking to address this problem. According to Lippman, KAUST is the “point of the spear for the transition to a knowledge society.” **King Abdullah** wants to evolve from a mere extractive economy into a new era of competition in the global marketplace. Controversially, the entire KAUST campus is co-educational, and has therefore received much press attention. More quietly, King Abdullah has also made 17 private elementary schools co-educational through Grade 3. Some people have criticized KAUST for its geographical isolation and its failure to benefit the average Saudi. However, Lippman sees a different problem: KAUST’s exclusive focus on graduate-level science and technology. Lippman will get excited when Saudis begin to conduct groundbreaking research on Voltaire.

While women undoubtedly benefit from KAUST, other developments like the construction of an all-women's university in Riyadh only furthers gender separation, which has become a "tremendous drain" on the economy. While over half the country's university students are women, there is no proportionate place for them in the Saudi economy. However, unlike in the past, **more Saudis understand that it's counterproductive to squander the productive and creative capabilities of women.** As such, "little by little, workplace by workplace, profession by profession" opportunities are spreading by economic necessity. Lippman saw this change firsthand. Unlike with his previous trips to Saudi Arabia, he had greater access this time to emboldened women making real contributions to Saudi society, providing strong anecdotal evidence of a change in the way Saudis perceive the role of women.

Lippman observed that the business and political leaders of Saudi Arabia have a "sophisticated understanding of their own country, but they don't have a clear path of how to address the issues." While Americans may regard social barriers as artificial, they are quite real to the Saudis. For example, no one, not even women, want co-educational high schools. At the same time, the religious police have become less obtrusive in people's lives. Even still, according to one businessman Lippman interviewed, Saudis don't want elections because they fear the chaos it might bring, as in the case of Lebanon. Therefore, Lippman argues the Saudis are seeking to balance their cherished traditions and the need for change. That's why the Saudi King has one of the world's most difficult jobs.

During the question and answer session, Lippman admitted that like any outsider, he only interacted with a "pretty narrow" segment of Saudi society. He dismissed the idea of the "Arab street" as the Loch Ness monster, a fearsome but imaginary creature. The leadership feels responsible for the aspirations of the Saudi people, but not through representational democracy. As such, **change will not be issued through royal decree, but through the intersections of increased education, international interaction, economic pressures and human nature.** Nonetheless, King Abdullah has been leading by example and has made a conscious effort to temper the ultra-conservative wing of Saudi society.

However, the King's age has sparked questions of who – and what – will come next. King Abdullah has designed a formalized process for choosing the next Crown Prince after **Crown Prince Sultan**, which Lippman compared to the process of the Cardinals choosing the next Pope. While Lippman calls this creation of an allegiance council a political and governmental "stroke of genius," he admitted less than 20 people know what the future of succession might bring.

When asked about the role of America in promoting economic and democratic reform, Lippman argued that American businesses are currently missing out on tremendous investment opportunities. However, **he warned against American interference in political affairs.** While America should clearly declare their philosophical principles, the Saudis do not want democracy, especially when it entails external meddling.