



National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce الغرفة التجارية العربية الأمريكية الوطنية

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U.S. – ARAB CHAMBER CO-HOSTS CAPITOL HILL DISCUSSION ON SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Thought Leaders, in Partnership with the University of Central Florida, Explore “Saudi Arabia: Balancing Modernity, Reform, and Traditional Values”

Washington, DC - The National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce (NUSACC), in partnership with the University of Central Florida’s Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd Program for Strategic Research & Studies (PMBF), recently co-hosted a discussion panel entitled, “Saudi Arabia: Balancing Modernity, Reform, and Traditional Values.” The discussion featured two prominent thought leaders from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Khaled Al Maena, Editor-in-Chief of *The Saudi Gazette*, and Samar Fatany -- author, journalist and advocate for women.

The discussion was held on Capitol Hill in cooperation with NAAM, a Saudi NGO focused on cultural understanding and chaired by HRH Princess Reem Al Faisal, and on whose Board of Director both panelists sit. NUSACC Executive Vice President Curt Silvers moderated the

discussion, while PMBF Director Dave Dumke participated from the floor.



L to R: NUSACC EVP Curt Silvers, Khaled Al Maena, Samar Fatany, and PMBF Director David Dumke.

Noted NUSACC President & CEO David Hamod, “Our Chamber was pleased to support this thought-provoking, forward-looking discussion of issues that are important to the U.S. – Saudi relationship. That historic relationship is entering a new phase, and it was our good fortune that two of the Kingdom’s most respected thought leaders



National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce الغرفة التجارية العربية الأمريكية الوطنية

could be in Washington DC to provide context for this important discussion.”

A wide variety of reporters, business leaders, and Congressional staff members turned out to hear the panelists describe change in Saudi Arabia as occurring incrementally, but inexorably. “Saudi Arabia is a completely different place than it was ten years ago,” Al Maena observed.

Samar Fatany addressed the issue of social change in Saudi society and a growing role for women. She noted the appointment of thirty women to the Saudi *Shura* (Consultative) Council, and she observed that most Saudi business delegations now include women. On the “hot button” issue of women and the right to drive, for example, Fatany cited certain conservative elements in the Kingdom who are slowing the participation of women in Saudi society as a whole. She suggested that the government is working to develop a consensus on such issues before taking action and that this will take time. Nevertheless, Fatany predicted, women will be allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia, as well as participate more fully in other areas of the society that has historically been dominated by men. “Reform is underway, but it will occur at a more gradual pace than some Americans might wish,” Fatany concluded.

Audience members participated in a remarkable, hour-long question and answer session with the panelists. “I don’t believe I’ve ever moderated such a lengthy and informed Q&A,” noted NUSACC’s Silvers. “It is a



Panelists respond to questions from Congressional staff and business leaders.

testament to the high-level of interest in Saudi Arabia and U.S.-Saudi relations.” PMBF’s Dumke noted the broad level of audience participation, from Congressional staff to journalists and business leaders. “The level of interest in hearing these noted journalists has been similar across the United States,” Dumke reported.

Both panelists were highly optimistic about the future for Saudi Arabia and the U.S.-Saudi relationship, although some attendees pressed the panelists on their views. Asked one attendee, “For years, advocates of a strong U.S.-Saudi relationship have argued that the two countries have more in common than they have differences. With current disagreements over Syria, Iran, and Egypt, how can one argue that the two still have more in common?”



National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce الغرفة التجارية العربية الأمريكية الوطنية

Al Maeena responded, “Both Saudi Arabia and the United States have deep and critical reasons that the relationship has endured for so long. These strategic requirements mean both countries need each other, and I am sure that relations will remain strong well into the future.” Al Maeena also noted, however, that Saudi and U.S. interests are not always identical. “It is not unreasonable or uncommon for friendly nations to have differences of views sometimes. This does not constitute a ‘crisis’,” he said.

Al Maeena and Fatany concluded their remarks by thanking the National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce and the University of Central Florida. “Without your support, our message to U.S. audiences would not have been possible.”

Panelist Biographies

Khaled Al-Maeena is currently the Editor-in-Chief of the Saudi Gazette, one of the largest and widely read newspapers in the Middle East and is a well-known columnist throughout the Middle East and South Asian region. Al-Maeena is a well-known expert on Saudi Arabia, GCC, Middle East and South Asian issues. His newspaper's groundbreaking work in covering South Asian issues for the Indian and Pakistani expat community in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region has been recognized on numerous occasions. He regularly appears in the Western media - in print, TV and on radio. In an informal capacity, Al-Maeena has been a well-recognized, respected and discreet advisor to top Saudi government officials. He has represented Saudi Arabia at several important summit meetings in the Arab world and beyond - including sensitive diplomatic visits to China and Russia. He is a co-founder and Vice Chairman of NAAM, an NGO dedicated, among other things, to cross-cultural communications.

Samar Fatany is a writer and columnist for the Saudi Gazette, Khaleej Times and Asia Week. She is also Senior Radio Journalist at Radio Jeddah, where she has a regular show focusing on a broad range of topics including culture, religion and international relations. She has frequently appeared in the Western media including BBC, CNN, NPR and NBC. She has made significant contributions in social awareness campaigns, including fighting extremism, enhancing the role of women in society and empowering Saudi youth. Fatany has authored three books: *Saudi Perceptions and Western Misconceptions*, *Saudi Challenges and Reforms*, and *A New Era for Saudi Women*. She is a co-founder and Vice Chairman of NAAM, an NGO dedicated, among other things, to cross-cultural communications.

The National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce, widely regarded as the voice of American business in the Arab world, is in touch with business communities across the United States and serves as the U.S. point of contact for the national chambers of commerce in the 22 Arab nations. On a daily basis, NUSACC works closely with leaders throughout the Arab world, as well as high-level decision makers in the U.S. business community, public policy research centers, multilateral institutions, nongovernmental organizations, media, and the U.S. Government.