



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
Gulf Research Center



SAUDI • BRITISH SOCIETY
الجمعية السعودية البريطانية

Saudi-British Society's Annual Dinner and Rawabi Holding Award Presentation

the Institute of Directors, 116 Pall Mall, London SW1

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24th January 2018

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Good evening ladies and gentlemen. It is indeed an honor and a privilege to stand before you today to accept the Rawabi Holding Award. I have a deep respect and admiration for the work of the Saudi-British Society, which continues to play a major role in helping to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between two countries that have long and historic relations with one another. I must give a special thanks to Sheikh Abdulaziz al Turki; it is truly humbling that you have considered me for such an award. Thank you for initiating this award and for your continued generosity and support for the Saudi British Society.

My first introduction to Saudi-British relations began on a personal level, when I moved to the UK in 1978 to pursue a higher education. Indeed, the time I spent in Britain in those early years of my higher education was the precursor for what would be a career dedicated to international affairs, and specifically supporting research on the Gulf region, and making it accessible to those around the world. This idea formed the basic mission of the Gulf Research Center when I founded it in 2000. At that time, within academia, there was an overall deficiency in research and publications on the affairs of the Arab Gulf countries, and when research did exist, it was usually from an outsider perspective. In particular, what was needed was a perspective from the Gulf region itself in order to make sure that the regional voice was included and better understood.

Since then, I am proud to say that the GRC has been at the forefront of Gulf Affairs in the think tank community, and realizing its objectives



of promoting communication and cooperation among GCC citizens to facilitate reforms in the region and secure a better future, in publishing and distributing relevant and useful information and data on the GCC states within and outside the region so as to enhance knowledge and understanding, in providing education and training solutions through implementing a 'Knowledge Program' which targets higher management circles, and in preparing studies and offering expert consultations to governmental and non-governmental organizations in fields linked with the GRC's primary areas of focus.

Throughout the years since its founding, the GRC has carried out countless events, research and publications on GCC-UK and Saudi-UK relations, recognizing that the relationship between Britain and the Gulf is a long and privileged one, whose importance remains relevant today, especially given the turmoil that the region is witnessing. With ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, and taking into account Iran's increasing hostility, it is crucial for Saudi Arabia to continue to maintain strong alliances at the international level. The security and stability of the region remains the number one priority of the Kingdom, and considering Britain's historically influential diplomatic and economic role in the Gulf and wider Middle East, strong British-Saudi relations are and will always be essential in efforts to promote peace and stability. Economically, Saudi Arabia is Britain's largest market and trading partner in the Middle East, with overall bilateral trade estimated at \$18.7 billion per year. Approximately 6,000 British companies are actively exporting to Saudi



Arabia. Britain is also the second largest cumulative investor in Saudi Arabia, after the United States, with an estimated 200 British-Saudi joint ventures with a total investment of more than \$13.5 billion.

All of these statistics reflect Saudi Arabia and Britain's deep-rooted economic ties, and considering Saudi Vision 2030's plan to increase foreign investment in the Kingdom, the opportunities to further strengthen these economic relations have the potential to expand exponentially in the coming years. During her visit to the Kingdom last year, UK Prime Minister Theresa May emphasized that Saudi ties with the UK are important for security and prosperity, and more recently, during the second session of the Manama Dialogue, UK Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson expressed his country pride in the close and historical relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, and reiterated the UK's commitment to maintaining the security of the region. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has already announced a planned visit to the UK in the coming months. Such an important visit will only strengthen the relations between the two kingdoms.

Therefore, while I say with confidence that we should be optimistic about senior leadership in both the UK and Saudi Arabia continuing to prioritize Saudi-British relations in the New Year and beyond, we need to remain realistic and recognize that at the same time, relations do not proceed on auto-pilot and there is a need to guide those relations so that their potential can be reached. Thus, relations must be supplemented by widespread research and analysis, and a thorough understanding of the



issues involved. This is the area where the Gulf Research Center plays I believe a pivotal role, in utilizing academic, high-quality research in order to foster better and more constructive relations between the Gulf and the international community, including the United Kingdom, so that both sides can better comprehend the perspectives of the other. As a think tank that uniquely provides an Arab Gulf perspective on international affairs, the GRC has been an important counterpart to British institutions where the study of the Gulf has represented a significant portion of their work for some time.

More specifically, the GRC has striven to support British-Gulf relations on several levels. First and foremost, through our office in Cambridge, we organize what is certainly the biggest gathering of Gulf Studies scholars throughout the year, the Gulf Research Meeting or GRM. This meeting has been held annually at the University of Cambridge since 2010, and in that time, the GRM has brought together nearly 3,000 participants, with over 100 workshops in which more than 1,700 papers have been debated and presented. Out of this, more than 40 edited volumes have been published. Notably, the GRM encourages young scholars to participate, which has in effect nurtured the next generation of scholars and policy leaders focused on the Gulf. The GRC Cambridge Board of Trustees, which includes a combination of scholars from the UK and the Gulf, such as Sir Richard Dearlove, Amb. Stuart Laing, Dr. Geoffrey Edwards and Prof. Timothy Niblock play an active role in the success of the annual meeting and GRC Cambridge's mission to advance



education and research in the UK and beyond on political, economic, social, and security issues and other matters relating to member countries of the GCC. In 2018, the Gulf Research Meeting will hold its ninth annual meeting at the end of July and we once again have an exciting line-up of workshops on critical topics to which scholars and the interested public can apply to. And we are certainly looking forward to 2019 when the Gulf Research Meeting will celebrate its tenth anniversary.

Another significant way that the GRC has supported British-Gulf and British-Saudi relations is through engaging with British think tanks and holding joint events and research programs with institutions throughout the UK, including Chatham House, RUSI, LSE, Durham University and Exeter University just to name a few. Our most recent event in this context, a meeting with the European Council on Foreign Relations on Saudi-Europe relations, took place in October 2017 here in London and involved senior policy officials from all the major EU member states. Also this year in May 2017, the GRC conducted a joint event with Chatham House on the “Way Forward in the Yemen Conflict” again bringing together nearly 100 specialists, policy officials and representatives from Saudi Arabia and Yemen for an in-depth discussion into the situation in Yemen and the perspectives behind the coalition effort to bring about a lasting solution to the current conflict. In fact, the GRC has a long history of organizing major events with its UK counterparts. It’s worth highlighting that following the terrorist attacks committed in London on July 7, 2005, the GRC was the first think tank to



respond by immediately organizing a workshop in London on the fight against terrorism, which brought together Arab and British diplomats, governmental officials and counter-terrorism experts. At the GRC, it has always been our belief that in order to face such challenges, we must work to transform tragic experiences into opportunities for greater cooperation and understanding.

Finally, the GRC has continued to engage with policy officials in many areas to discuss and improve relations and forward recommendations. I understand that it may be controversial to discuss the European Union at a meeting with the Saudi-British Society in the midst of Brexit negotiations, but I cannot fail to mention the significant engagement that occurred between British and Gulf policy officials as a result of the GRC's project with the EU on Promoting Deeper EU-GCC Relations, which was carried out from 2012-2013. In the context of this project, various conferences, publications and training sessions on foreign policy, political transformation, climate policy, and higher education were carried out in joint efforts between GCC and European policy officials, including those from the UK.

I could go on about all the ways that the GRC has worked towards fostering positive relations between the GCC countries and the UK through the promotion and advocacy for research, education and cooperation. Suffice it to say that I began the Gulf Research Center in 2000 purely out of a passion for Gulf Affairs and a recognition that there was a need for the Gulf perspective to be represented in research and



policy decisions concerning the region. I could not have anticipated just how much the organization would grow, and I am deeply thankful for all those who have supported the Gulf Research Center over the years. There is not enough time for me to thank all those who have contributed to the success of the organization and directly or indirectly contributed to fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between countries of the GCC and the rest of the world. Fruitful and beneficial relations between the GCC countries and the UK, and in particular Saudi Arabia, must be fostered and supported by active research and policy analysis, and I am proud that the GRC has been able to accomplish this in the eighteen years since its foundation. Sheikh Abdulaziz, members of the Saudi British Society, I am deeply humbled to accept this honorable award, and it is my hope that I continue to live up to the principles that it represents, looking to the future evolution of the Gulf Research Center and how it can continue to lead in providing a Gulf perspective in addressing the major challenges facing the region.

Thank you.