

SAUDI-BRITISH SOCIETY  
**THE RAWABI HOLDING AWARDS 2017**

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY Ms. HODA AL HELAISSI

Ladies and gentlemen

It is a great honour to be here today amongst family and friends to receive this lovely prize, a prize that, to be completely honest, was totally unexpected. In fact, it took me a little while to understand what dear Derek Plumbly was actually saying when he called to inform me of it, and to be even more honest, I'm still wondering whether or not I really deserve it.

Regardless... My infinite thanks to Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-Turki and the Saudi-British Society; to the Munros, the Plumblys and the Cockings, to the Middle East Association and David Lloyd... the list is very long.

I owe a lot to Britain. It is where I grew up, where I learnt and developed and where I discovered life in so many of its facets. My sister, brothers and I are the products of a British education. My father was the Saudi Ambassador to the UK, his last post before he retired in 1976. So we lived in London – having moved here from Rome – since 1966 and carried on living here well after he moved back to Riyadh. We went to school in London – my sister and I to the Lycee Francais de Londres and my brothers to Eton and Millfield – and after our A' levels, we, the girls of the family, went to University here too.

So, England has “molded” us in many different ways. I believe that what was special about our education was the fact that it was truly multi-cultural: a French school, with students from all over the world, living in London – itself cosmopolitan – with Arabic, and specifically Saudi and Muslim values at home. It enabled us to see the world through a kaleidoscope: coloured fragments, each one beautiful on its own but even more so as a whole. It was easy to accept differences, firstly because we were young and children are generally more accepting of differences than adults, and secondly because these differences were part of the fibre of our lives. Soon, these differences, be them of culture, colour, gender or status, became the norm, and I can only emphasize how enriching it was to us. In addition, we came into contact with different languages, different religions, different traditions and different ethics. It would be totally impossible to be left unmarked by such an environment and as such, I truly believe that we should applaud these differences, learn from these diversities and desist from adding tags to people or ideologies (etc.) because emphasizing them only accentuates them and implies negativity. In simple terms, it only means that being different is bad. It is time we celebrate and accept the diversity and variety of the world we live in and understand that these differences are part of one's identity.

I am grateful for having grown up at a time when – what I now call – individualism was advocated and respected before the implementation of the uniformity of globalization in which we have lost the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the individual. Part of the particularity of individualism is the educational and inspirational nature of relationships and the factors that result from it, such as knowledge, understanding and, more importantly, tolerance, characteristics that seem to be lacking more and more and which, sadly, will lead to a loss of basic human sentiments that are at the core of humanity and the humanitarian feelings of benevolence that come with it.

As far back as history has been recorded, evidence of trading across borders has resulted in the

introduction of diverse peoples to each other. Necessity was the cause, but the end result was a long-lasting enriching mix of civilisations and cultures.

It says in the Holy Koran: "... We have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another" (Verse 13 – Alhojorat) and one way was through trade which goes back at least 9000 years but more likely further to the times ships were invented. And today, it is international trade that is at the core of the global economy and it is because of international trade that our modern industrial world has developed and prospered. It enhances national economies and has opened doors to employment and competition, the more of which not only lowers world prices but also boosts inspiration, innovation, research and technology as well as makes use of local natural and human resources as it caters to supply and demand across borders. It indirectly improves quality, environmental standards and the exchange of best practices.

So trade is indispensable on many levels: it fosters the knowledge of cultures and connects peoples on an international level and therefore should also be considered as a facilitator of peace and stability because it encourages peaceful relationships in a world where conflicts, poverty and inequality are increasing. It strengthens ties between nations and brings people together.

The origins of Saudi-British relations date back to the First World War, when Abdulaziz bin Saud signed the 1915 Treaty of Darin with the British government, thereby accepting the status of a British protectorate. The United Kingdom was among the first nations to recognise Saudi Arabia in 1926 and in 1930, Saudi Arabia opened its embassy in London.

Saudi-British relations have always been strong and important to both economies, making Saudi Arabia the UK's most significant trading partner in the Middle East, and a strong strategic partner in the Vision 2030 program.

According to the Saudi British Joint Business Council, the UK exported £7.34 billion of goods and services in 2015 alone with over 6000 UK firms actively engaging and exporting goods to Saudi Arabia, and over 200 joint ventures estimated to be worth around £11.5 billion. Ongoing projects, with revenues well in the billions, apply to a variety of sectors such as transport, water, health, education, and energy with privatization being a priority target under Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia offers considerable and meaningful opportunities to both countries, it is a country that is growing fast and which has, as most of you here are aware, achieved immeasurable goals in the short 80 years of its "modern" existence. And although, from time to time, certain political events challenge the very core of these well-founded relationships, Saudi-British relations have proven strong and well-established.

Saudi Arabia has immensely changed, not at the demand of external forces which view these changes as being slow and insufficient, but as part of the natural internal process of evolution. Our population is young, up to 65% is under the age of 30. It is a youth that is very well connected to the outside world through social media – we are the highest users of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp in the Gulf if not the Middle East. It is a youth that knows what it wants, a youth that understands and respects its identity which is embodied in our traditions and religion. It is a youth that does not want to live the way its parents or grandparents lived and one that also realizes that even if it did desire to do so, it would not be feasible economically.

Therefore, we are, in Saudi Arabia, at an important threshold in our development and it is dictated

by two factors: youth and the economy. The third crucial element in the equation is education which is fueling this development at a significant pace. If change is to remain and evolve, it can never be imposed on a country. It must come from within at the speed of its population. And we certainly are no exception. I have seen so many changes in my lifetime, some petty and others amazing. But none more profoundly effective as those that took place during King Abdullah's reign – may he rest in peace. Starting with education, he understood that the foundation stone of any industrialised society is education and in 2005 the King Abdullah's Scholarship Program opened the doors to education abroad for both girls and boys, to receive Bachelor, Master or PhD degrees from some of the best universities in the world. It also included a package for the spouse and children giving them also the opportunity to benefit from their stay abroad. The program was to last only a couple of years and, although it has decreased in numbers since 2015, the Scholarship Program is still sending our students across the globe not just for a degree but also for the opening of mental horizons on a cultural level. There are over 150,000 Saudi students abroad, all of whom will bring back to Saudi Arabia something that will have an impact to the country in the years to come.

The other amazing change that King Abdullah was responsible for is the empowerment of women. Women have always worked in traditional professions: mainly health and education. King Abdullah opened the job market to women, stressing the fact that they are half our society and have therefore as much right to the marketplace as their male counterparts. Official numbers state that 21% of the work force is held by women – a number that is still low but that is increasing due partly to the fact that the government is placing a lot of emphasis on this sector. But perhaps the most strategically significant act regarding women took place in 2013, when King Abdullah changed the Saudi Basic Law of Governance by stipulating that a minimum of 20% of the Shura Council shall be made up of women, which is higher than in most countries. This means 30 women members out of a total of 150.

The Shura Council is similar to Parliament except that we are a nominated consultative body, part of which shall eventually be elected. The mandate for any one term is 4 years and I had the honour of being one of the first 30 women and am proud to be serving again for another term. Our second term began in late December with 10 of the first 30 women being re-nominated to whom were added another 20. All members, be they men or women, have exactly the same rights, the same pay and the same privileges. Part of our duties entail reviewing all ministries' reports, making recommendations to improve their performance, amending existing laws by adding or removing clauses, introducing new laws and studying agreements and MoUs. There are 14 different committees, each specializing in a particular area, such as Health, Education and Human Rights etc. I belong to the Foreign Affairs committee and although it is possible to change from one committee to another from year to year, I have opted to remain in this one since I joined the Shura Council. We also work with Parliaments all over the world through our Parliamentary Friendship Committees, and we are part of International Organisations such as the United Nations, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the GCC, the Arab Parliament, the WHO, to name but a few.

Our work is challenging and although we represent the government, we also represent the people as each member comes from different backgrounds and different areas. Dialogue and communication are important in our work, on all levels whether with the local or international communities. It is important to bridge gaps and to find common ground so as to improve relationships between peoples and nations.

Saudi Arabia understands the meaning and importance of partnerships and throughout the years

has built a backbone of alliances with different countries. As I said earlier, the UK is a priority in many crucial fields. And yet, today, because of the general negative atmosphere surrounding Saudi Arabia at the moment, further work needs to be done to solidify this alliance, especially on the cultural level. As I mentioned, Saudi Arabia has invested millions on education through scholarship programs and educational partnerships and this has increased young Saudis' understanding and perceptions of western cultures. It is now time to capitalize on this solid base and fight the rampant stereotypes of Saudis and Saudi Arabia which are prevalent in Europe and the US and which damage relationships; it is time to identify and promote shared values, dialogue in favour of cultural diversity and endorse understanding. It is time to go beyond superficialities and accept the fact that there are various ways of living our lives and not just one, dictated by some far away entity which doesn't take into consideration the rich diversity that exists in different layers of society such as the tribal, the traditional or the religious in the case of Saudi Arabia.

I would like to thank you all once again for this great honour and hope that, through individuals like yourselves, individuals who believe in bridging gaps and opening doors, Saudi-British relations will only have one way to go... upwards.

Thank you.