

SAUDI-BRITISH SOCIETY
THE RAWABI HOLDING AWARDS 2017

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY DR. MARK C. THOMPSON

Assalamu 'Alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh
Good evening ladies and gentlemen

Firstly, of course, many thanks to Shaikh Abdulaziz Al Turki for his continuing generosity and support of the Saudi-British Society. Thank you also to the committee of the Society for nominating me and then awarding me the Rawabi Prize—actually the notification email came as a complete surprise. Without a doubt, to be considered worthy of this award is indeed an honour and it means a great deal to me. Thank you also to my friends and colleagues for accepting to share this evening with me—I'm very glad you could come. Now unfortunately, there are several hundred individuals, who would love to be here as well, and of course, I am talking about my wonderful students, both past and present, at King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals (or KFUPM as many of you know it). However, I know many of them are here in spirit and I thank them very much for all their many messages of congratulations not just today, but also in class on Monday.

Now Ionis has requested that I keep my speech “short and light” as this is supposed to be an evening of enjoyment. Therefore, even though I am standing in front of a group of people as I do several times every week at the university, I am going to do my absolute best not to slip into my usual “teacher mode”—which some of you know quite well. So, don't worry if you are sitting at the back checking your WhatsApp messages.

So, to provide some context to receiving this award, I was very fortunate growing up that my late father was an international bank manager with the Standard & Chartered Bank as this meant I spent my formative years living overseas and travelling extensively. This travelling has continued throughout my life, but when I look back I remember that when I was in my twenties, people would ask me where I wanted to visit and I would reply by reeling off a list of exotic places. But, I'm ashamed to admit that at the same time I often used to say that I had absolutely no interest in visiting Saudi Arabia. That just goes to show how completely wrong you can be and how life is full of surprises and unexpected turns. However, on a more serious note, I also believe it demonstrates how as individuals our perceptions of other nations and cultures can be influenced by distortions which reinforce stereotypes, misconceptions and sadly outright lies. Certainly, prior to my first visit to the Kingdom my own perceptions had been coloured by these distortions. Of course, after arriving in Saudi Arabia I quickly discovered that these bore very little resemblance to the truth.

And at this point I would like to draw your attention to a wonderful KFUPM student project I was fortunate to be involved with called “Saudi Arabia: The Eyes of Others”. This short film addresses the issue of these distortions and misconceptions of the Kingdom. I am very happy to say that the video got a great deal of attention when it was released and the students were interviewed on Al Arabiya TV channel. It's available on YouTube and Kate Marris posted it on the Saudi-British Society Twitter account. I recommend you take a look at this. Now if anyone is interested in hearing about these sorts of projects and would like to get in touch with me at KFUPM, please take my card this evening and feel free to contact me at any time.

Nowadays, I'm in the position to be able to say that I hope that my experience of living and working in different parts of Saudi Arabia, with Saudis from diverse backgrounds now gives me the

opportunity to redress the balance by way of my international conference presentations and publications. As an academic who specializes in Saudi socio-politics, I believe it is my duty to offer a more objective perspective of the Kingdom; and importantly, a perspective that doesn't come from outside the Kingdom, but from someone who works for a Saudi institution and is integrated into the community.

This is important to me because deciding to go and work in Saudi Arabia for the first time was undoubtedly one of the best decisions of my life. In fact, upon arrival in Jeddah something just 'clicked' and I felt an immediate affinity for the Kingdom. But I also I realised that I really knew nothing of the truth about Saudi Arabia and as I started to explore and learn more about the country, I very quickly became completely fascinated with all aspects of Saudi life—and I have never stopped being fascinated by Saudi Arabia from that first day until now. And underlying this ongoing interest in Saudi Arabia is the fact that I have always felt completely at home there, and I know this is due to the friendship and warmth that I have been shown over the years by so many Saudi friends, my research interviewees and of course a great many of my colleagues and students, whether during the last five years at KFUPM, or before that other institutions such as King Faisal Center for Research & Islamic Studies, Prince Sultan University and the Saudi National Guard.

Obviously, in this short speech, as much as I would like to, I do not have time to either mention or thank all the Saudis who have shown me friendship or helped me in some way over the years. But if I had to highlight one area, then I would like to say that my engagement with young Saudis from all walks of life has been hugely rewarding and instructive—and continues to be so. In fact, I am currently researching a book for Cambridge University Press about contemporary societal issues and their impact on young Saudi men—some aspects of which I discussed during last year's Al Gosaibi Memorial Lecture, which some of you attended. But since then, and particularly in the last six months, this research has taken me all over the Kingdom and to date I have conducted around 30 focus group discussions in a variety of locations and with different types of young men, including for example, with young medical interns in Abha; final year high school students in Jeddah; up-and-coming consultants working on National Transformation Projects in Riyadh, male nurses in al-Ahsa and engineers in Jubail. In fact, I have just returned from an amazing research trip to Al Qassim Province where I spent a lot of time with young Qassimis in Onaizah and al-Mithnab. It was one of the most interesting trips I have ever undertaken in the Kingdom. And fortunately I will be returning soon for additional focus groups in Buraydah and on the way there in al-Majmaah and al-Ghat. And this is probably a very good point to refer to the money aspect of the award, and I would like to inform Shaikh Abdulaziz and the committee that it is going to be used to fund additional research trips around the Kingdom between now and Ramadan. So I hope you agree that it's going to be put to good use and indeed, when the book is published there will be a tangible outcome.

Certainly, I feel incredibly privileged to spend this time with these young Saudis and engage in discussions about important issues related to their futures and therefore the future of Saudi Arabia. When I listen to their opinions, they are always relevant, discerning and carry weight. Actually, this whole discussion process is not only highly insightful, but it's also great fun and can be very uplifting. In fact, it makes me feel optimistic about Saudi Arabia's future. And of course, I continue to add to my knowledge as I learn about the views of different constituencies around the Kingdom. Because it's not just about comprehending differences; it's also about identifying commonalities. Very often these commonalities are ones that young Saudi men not only share with their peers in different parts of the Kingdom, but also with their peers across the world: for example, concerns about jobs, affordable housing, decent healthcare and the cost of marriage—

we all recognize that these are actually universal concerns.

I have tried to avoid ending on too serious a note, but sadly we seem to be living in an age of what appears to be growing intolerance and rejection of the “other” for no other reason than “the other is foreign or different”. I consider myself extremely fortunate and blessed that my late parents forever stressed the importance of tolerance, acceptance of diversity and the need to be open to other societies and cultures. So, for me, to get recognition of promoting understanding of county that I love is extremely gratifying, but I also believe that it is recognition of my late parents efforts and example.

So, in conclusion, I know that Saudi Arabia has been very good to me. The Kingdom has given, and continues to give me a great deal and I hope very much that my efforts whether as an instructor to my marvellous students at a great university or my various research projects are seen and understood as my way of attempting to reciprocate the hospitality and kindness that I am consistently shown. Because this is something that I do not take for granted, and I give thanks daily for the opportunities that Saudi Arabia and its people have afforded me.

Once again, my sincere thanks to Shaikh Abdulaziz and the Saudi-British Society for this award and I hope everyone has a wonderful evening.

Thank you very much.