



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ P.O. Box 25533 ♦ Washington, DC 20027-8533

Middle East Institute

“Reform in Saudi Arabia: Past, Present and Future”

1761 N St. NW

Wednesday, June 18, 2008 12pm

The Middle East Institute invited **Usamah al-Kurdi** to discuss the status of political, economic, and women’s reform in Saudi Arabia. Since 2001, Al-Kurdi has served as a member of the Majlis Al-Shura Consultative Council of Saudi Arabia. MEI’s Vice President, **Dr. Michael Ryan** introduced the speaker.

Al-Kurdi noted that reform first began in Saudi Arabia in 1993, when King Fayd established the Shura Council, the regional councils, and passed a governance law, which al-Kurdi referred to as essentially Saudi Arabia’s “constitution.” Al-Kurdi outlined the progress since 1993.

On the political front, al-Kurdi cited the **emergence of municipal elections and was confident that over time elections will be held on the regional and national level.** The Shura Council has established many government-sponsored civil society groups focusing on human rights, the disabled, and poverty issues. He related the story of a friend, who after returning to Saudi Arabia after many years said that the biggest change has been the press. “I am reading things that would have been unthinkable to read before!”

On women’s rights, the aim of the Shura Council is to shape a legal and social environment in which women can be empowered. The Council established the first women’s rights committee to address issues pertaining to women in business. He noted that while women comprise 35% of government employees, the Council wants to open the door to employment in the private sector. “In the Shura Council, **we debated [the issue of women’s participation in elections] and agreed that we need to take things slowly to prevent chaos.**”

When asked the role of religion in reform, al-Kurdi stated “We all accept [that religion is a major part of life] and we don’t want to deviate from this. **We like to say that ‘Islam is good anywhere and anytime’ because it is not limited to only one interpretation. It can change to accommodate modern times.**”

When asked about the country’s “top down” approach to reform (as seen in the numerous government-created civil society organizations), al-Kurdi stated that it was necessary for the Shura Council to initiate these organizations, “before a fully-fledged civil society can work.”

Al-Kurdi described the political structure in Saudi Arabia as very similar to the US, “except that the King can also issue laws directly.” He was quick to note that since the passage

of the governance law, the King has chosen not to do so, but instead to send it through the Shura Council. “The Council is an appointed parliament, not that different from the UK.”

In regard to how U.S. foreign policy can best contribute to political reform, al-Kurdi argued that **U.S. assistance must be limited to only supplying Saudi Arabia with lessons from its own experiences.** “Mass democratization does not work. The idea is to let countries decide how to reform for themselves, while learning from foreign experiences. We won’t resolve the debates tomorrow, but we are deciding for ourselves what is good for us.”

Al-Kurdi ended the event noting that reform is an ongoing process, and that “you cannot put a timeframe on change...**Reform must be at a speed that is convenient for Saudi Arabia. Outside pressure can work, but sometimes it backfires, and there is fear that outside pressure may cause the entire movement to collapse.**”