

Knowledge Vital for Progress: Said HRH Prince Khaled AL-Faisal

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JEDDAH, 13 January 2008 — Makkah Governor Prince Khaled Al-Faisal inaugurated the first Arab knowledge economy conference here yesterday and hoped that its deliberations would boost ongoing efforts to promote knowledge-based economies in the Arab and Islamic world.

“If **economics** is the ruling factor in our modern world, **knowledge economy** is the fuel required for economic development... Knowledge has become even more important than weapons,” the prince told experts from different countries attending the conference.

He said that becoming part of the new world order was no longer a choice but a necessity. “Every nation in this new world order will be valued in accordance with the volume of knowledge they have,” he said, adding that knowledge would help better utilization of material resources.

Prince Khaled said Saudi Arabia has been a pioneer in promoting a knowledge-based economy. He underscored the efforts of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah and Crown Prince Sultan to boost the Kingdom’s qualitative development by **introducing reforms**.

He said the launch of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Thuwal, near Jeddah, last year was a major step toward creating a knowledge-based society. “This university, which has recruited about 100 international experts to work for postgraduate research, has opened its doors to all nationals,” he said.

The governor said the Kingdom had restructured its education, research and training systems to bring about qualitative progress. “The number of universities in the Kingdom doubled in a single year. It also allocated a quarter of its annual budget last year for education,” he added.

“Our telecom sector has achieved unprecedented growth and our e-government project is progressing well,” Prince Khaled said. He also referred to the government’s efforts to protect the minds of young Saudis from deviant thoughts and ideologies as part of its move to confront extremism and terrorism.

Prince Faisal ibn Abdullah, chairman of the Al-Aghar strategic think tank group, spoke about a new strategy that is being worked out in association with the Islamic Development Bank to have a knowledge-based community within the next 15 years.

Speaking at the conference, Mohammed Al-Tuwaijiri, Arab League assistant secretary-general for economic affairs, announced the League’s plan to develop Arab education, adding that the plan would be presented at the next Arab summit in Damascus.

Earlier in the day, delegates were treated to some innovative ideas and doses of hard reality. The forum opened at the Jeddah Hilton with a discussion on the definitions of the term “knowledge



Makkah Governor Prince Khaled Al-Faisal, right, and Prince Faisal ibn Abdullah, chairman of Al-Aghar Group, share a light moment at the inauguration of the first Arab knowledge economy conference in Jeddah on Saturday. (AN photo by Adnan Mahdali)

economy” and a review of the historical fact of knowledge as an important ingredient in the industrial production process through Islamic and Western history.

The overall tone of the first day was positive, emphasizing a proactive approach to embracing new knowledge and techniques rather than reacting to changing situations with established historical precedents.

The two-day event was the first annual conference organized by the Arabian Knowledge Economy Association titled “Toward a Knowledge Economy.” It was actively supported by Makkah Governor Prince Khaled Al-Faisal and held in collaboration with the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Al-Aghar Group.

The speakers defined “knowledge economy” as one where knowledge was the most important part of the industrial process. “It puts man at the center of the economy,” they said.

Leif Edvinsson, president of the New Club of Paris, went further saying that it was the most productive way forward, as man’s creativity was the only infinitely renewable resource.

Quoting Muadh ibn Jabal, a companion of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Dr. Abdulkader Chachi of King Abdul Aziz University said that the Prophet “did not leave behind money, but (rather) knowledge. Whosoever acquires it benefits a great deal.”

This drove him to speculate why Islamic society’s leading role as the dominant intellectual culture for 800 years during the European “Dark Ages” went into decline and why there was such a great knowledge gap between Muslim countries and Western industrial countries today.

“Only nine Muslim countries are equal to or just above the average Knowledge Economy Index,” he told delegates.

Minister of State Abdullah Zainal, who chaired the opening session, said the development of human resources, in terms of education and skills, would help build intellectual capital and contribute toward the enhancement of knowledge economy.

Professor Salim Al-Hassani, chairman of the board of the UK-based Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilization, dealt with invention, innovation and entrepreneurship in Muslim civilization, and noted that the Gulf states were working vigorously toward achieving higher levels of electronic innovation, communication and information technology, the Internet and electronic services in view of the higher levels of incomes generated by soaring oil prices.

“But, the interest shown by Muslim countries in all forms of electronic services does not go beyond usage despite the fact that more than three decades have passed since the invention of the (computer) processor. This, in fact, is a disturbing situation. Will the share of the Muslim countries in the IT industry be similar to their share in the traditional industry? Moving from an economy that relies mainly on selling raw materials to one that is knowledge-based is not merely a vision, but a struggle that might take decades to realize.” For Muslim countries to move toward a knowledge economy and benefit from its results that lead to sustainable economic growth and development, they need to face various challenges. They need to have clear strategies to stimulate the knowledge economy through the development of policies and mechanisms. These include giving priority to teaching and training future generations; encouraging innovation and research, especially in modern technology and means of communications; motivating students to learn as a lifelong exercise; providing teaching aids and educational training for teachers; and reviewing the strategies of education from time to time, said Al-Hassani.

