

# Saudi King Tries to Grow Modern Ideas in Desert



Bryan Denton for The New York Times

The construction site for the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, Saudi Arabia's effort to build its own M.I.T.

By THANASSIS CAMBANIS  
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JIDDA, Saudi Arabia, Oct. 25 — On a marshy peninsula 50 miles from this Red Sea port, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is staking \$12.5 billion on a gargantuan bid to catch up with the West in science and technology.

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Bryan Denton for The New York Times

King Abdullah has broken taboos, declaring that the Arabs have fallen critically behind much of the modern world in intellectual achievement.

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Between an oil refinery and the sea, the monarch is building from scratch a graduate research institution that will have one of the 10 largest endowments in the world, worth more than \$10 billion.

Its planners say men and women will study side by side in an enclave walled off from the rest of Saudi society, the country's notorious religious police will be barred and all religious and ethnic groups will be welcome in a push for academic freedom and international collaboration sure to test the kingdom's cultural and religious limits.

This undertaking is directly at odds with the kingdom's religious establishment, which severely limits women's rights and rejects coeducation and robust liberal inquiry as unthinkable.

For the new institution, the king has cut his own education ministry out the loop, hiring the state-owned oil giant Saudi Aramco to build the campus, create its curriculum and attract foreigners.

Supporters of what is to be called the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, or Kaust, wonder

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Bryan Denton for The New York Times

For the new institution, the king has hired the state-owned oil giant Saudi Aramco to build the campus.



The New York Times

The university is going up 50 miles away from Jidda.

whether the king is simply building another gated island to be dominated by foreigners, like the compounds for oil industry workers that have existed here for decades, or creating an institution that will have a real impact on Saudi society and the rest of the Arab world.

“There are two Saudi Arabias,” said Jamal Khashoggi, the editor of Al Watan, a newspaper. “The question is which Saudi Arabia will take over.”

The king has broken taboos, declaring that the Arabs have fallen critically behind much of the modern world in intellectual achievement and that his country depends too much on oil and not enough on creating wealth through innovation.

“There is a deep knowledge gap separating the Arab and Islamic nations from the process and progress of contemporary global civilization,” said Abdallah S. Jumah, the chief executive of Saudi Aramco. “We are no longer keeping pace with the advances of our era.”

Traditional Saudi practice is on display at the biggest public universities, where the Islamic authorities vet the curriculum, medical researchers tread carefully around controversial subjects like evolution, and female and male students enter classrooms through separate doors and follow lectures while separated by partitions.

Old-fashioned values even seeped into the carefully staged groundbreaking ceremony on Sunday for King Abdullah’s new university, at which organizers distributed an issue of the magazine *The Economist* with a special advertisement for the university wrapped around the cover. State censors had physically torn from each copy an article about Saudi legal reform titled “Law of God Versus Law of Man,” leaving a jagged edge.

Despite the obstacles, the king intends to make the university a showcase for modernization. The festive groundbreaking and accompanying symposium about the future of the modern university were devised partly as a recruiting tool for international academics.

“Getting the faculty will be the biggest challenge,” said Ahmed F. Ghoniem, a professor at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) who is consulting for the new university. “That will make it or break it.” Professor Ghoniem has advised the new university to lure international academics with laboratory facilities and grants they cannot find at home, but he also believes that established professors will be reluctant to leave their universities for a small enclave in the desert.

“You have to create an environment where you can connect to the outside world,” said Professor Ghoniem, who is from Egypt. “You cannot work in isolation.”

He admitted that even though he admired the idea of the new university, he would be unlikely to abandon his post at M.I.T. to move to Saudi Arabia.

Festivities at the construction site on Sunday for 1,500 dignitaries included a laser light show and a mockup of the planned campus that filled an entire room. The king laid a crystal cornerstone into a stainless steel shaft on wheels.

Cranes tore out mangroves and pounded the swampland with 20-ton blocks into a surface firm enough to build the campus on. Inside a tent, the king, his honor guard wearing flowing robes and curved daggers, and an array of Aramco officials in suits took to a shiny stage lighted with green and blue neon tubing, like an [MTV](#) awards show. Mist from dry

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ice shrouded the stage, music blared in surround sound, and holographic projections served as a backdrop to some of the speeches.

From a laconic monarch known for his austerity, the pomp, along with a rare speech by the king himself, was intended to send a strong signal, according to the team charged with building and staffing the new campus within two years.

The king is lavishing the institution not only with money, but also with his full political endorsement, intended to stave off internal challenges from conservatives and to win over foreign scholars who doubt that academic freedom can thrive here.

The new project is giving hope to Saudi scholars who until the king's push to reform education in the last few years have endured stagnant research budgets and continue to face extensive government red tape.

"Because Aramco is founding the university, I believe it will have freedom," said Abdulmalik A. Aljinaidi, dean of the research and consultation institute at King Abdulaziz University, Jidda's biggest, with more than 40,000 students. "For Kaust to succeed, it will have to be free of all the restrictions and bureaucracy we face as a public university."

Even in the most advanced genetics labs at King Abdulaziz, the women wear full face coverings, and female students can meet with male advisers only in carefully controlled public "free zones" like the library. Scientists there tread carefully when they do research in genetics, [stem cells](#) or evolution, for fear of offending Islamic social mores.

Even in Jidda, the kingdom's most liberal city, a status rooted in its history as a trading outpost, change comes slowly. This month the governor allowed families to celebrate the post-Ramadan Id al-Fitr holiday in public, effectively allowing men and women to socialize publicly on the same streets for the first time.

The religious police were accused of beating a man to death because he was suspected of selling alcohol. Conservatives have fended off efforts by women to secure the right to drive or to run for office, although women have made considerable gains in access to segregated education and workplaces.

Against this backdrop, said Mr. Khashoggi, the newspaper editor, the king has conceived of the new university as a liberalizing counterweight, whose success depends on how much it engages the rest of Saudi society. "Nobody wants to live in a ghetto, even a nice one," Mr. Khashoggi said. "As a Saudi, I say, let's open up."

Upon completion, the energy-efficient campus will house 20,000 faculty and staff members, students and their families. Social rules will be more relaxed, as they are in the compounds where foreign oil workers live; women will be allowed to drive, for example. But the kingdom's laws will still apply: Israelis, barred by law from visiting Saudi Arabia, will not be able to collaborate with the university. And one staple of campus life worldwide will be missing: alcohol.

The university president will be a foreigner, and the faculty members and graduate students at first will be overwhelmingly foreign as well. Generous scholarships will finance the 2,000 graduate students; planners expect the Saudi share of the student body to increase over the years as scholarships aimed at promising current undergraduates help groom them for graduate studies at the new university.

The university's entire model is built around partnerships with other international universities, and faculty members are expected to have permanent bases at other research institutions abroad.

The university will also rely on a new free-market model. The faculty members will not have tenure, and almost all of them will have joint appointments. While the university will initially be awash in money, its faculty and graduate students will still have to compete with top international institutions for the limited pool of private money that underwrites most graduate research.

Suhair el-Qurashi, dean of the private all-female Dar Al Hekma College, often attacked as “bad” and “liberal,” said a vigorous example of free-thinking at the university would embolden the many Saudis who back the king’s quest to reform long-stagnant higher education.

“The king knows he will face some backlash and bad publicity,” Ms. Qurashi said. “I think the system is moving in the right direction.”

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