

ABDULSALAM HAYKAL SHARES HIS THOUGHTS ON...

The Shaheen, between the doves of hope and the new hawk of academic discrimination

I watched part of the inauguration of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), the new world-class research university in Saudi Arabia. The \$10 billion endowment to establish the institution was exciting news, especially in the Middle East, which has never seen an investment in education of this magnitude. Across the globe, many major American universities are making use of lucrative grants by KAUST, exceptionally helpful at a time when universities struggle with the financial crisis. However, KAUST has many other groundbreaking elements that make its introduction into the world of academia a historic moment. The challenge remains academic freedom needed for excellence in research to thrive, something that KAUST vowed to uphold.

It was reported that the University of California at Berkeley will receive \$28 million, Stanford University, \$25 million and the University of Texas, \$20 million under five-year agreements with KAUST. However, before it could make any agreements with American universities, the Kingdom had to trade some of its long standing traditions. KAUST guaranteed a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of race, religion or gender. It vowed "to be governed by an independent, self-perpetuating board of trustees," "to provide unfettered access to information," and "to nurture and protect freedom of research, thought, and discourse relating to scholarly work." That forced KAUST for the first time in the his-

tory of Saudi Arabia to have a co-ed campus, in which women would not have to wear the veil, and the religious police are not active.

Another major breakthrough is KAUST's IBM supercomputer called Shaheen (Arabic for falcon). For the regular computer user this probably does not mean much. But Shaheen is one of 14-systems around the world, and the largest in Asia by far. According to KAUST, Shaheen will help "deliver fundamental breakthroughs in specific areas of research." Shaheen has now a capacity of 222 Teraflops (a computing speed of a trillion floating point operations per second.) It is capable of advanced computations in weather and climate simulation, nuclear simulations, cosmology, quantum chemistry and fusion science. Ambitious, determined, and forward-looking, KAUST aims at the exaflop size (one million trillion calculations a second). Lie back and imagine the possibilities!

Among the first KAUST Discovery Scholarship recipients are 15 Syrian students. American universities as well as KAUST are well acquainted with Syrian academics and researchers. University of Michigan's Dr. Fawaz Ulaby was the founding Provost of KAUST. Many have noted that without him KAUST would not have been where it is today. Saudi Arabians claim Dr. Ulaby as their own, his father Tayseer being one of the Kingdom's doctors near the beginning of the oil era. Fawaz is deeply proud of his Syrian origin. When he presented KAUST to the board of trustees of the American University of Beirut, we were all

left with a "shock and awe" effect. However, I had a particular feeling of pride that an outstanding Syrian scientist has left his mark on many people around the world, and with KAUST, on the history of the region.

As heartwarming as it feels to read about King Abdullah's initiative and Fawaz Ulaby's accomplishment, it's a shame that the 15 Syrian KAUST students are not allowed to use the Shaheen. Why? American sanctions had to be observed in the agreement between KAUST and IBM. Syrian students were told that it was not a KAUST decision, rather one that related to the state of affairs between the US and Syria. KAUST is then forced to bend to politics, and act against academic freedom. To help our friends and colleagues at KAUST, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled on several occasions that, "[A university] can determine for itself on academic grounds, who may teach, what may be taught, how it should be taught, and who may be admitted to study. In addition, the Academic Bill of Rights calls for regulations that state: "Students and faculty will not be favored or disfavored because of their political views; campus publications will not be obstructed; academic institutions will adopt a neutral attitude in matters of politics, ideology or religion."

Time will tell if the Shaheen will fly with the academia doves or continue with the politics hawks. For KAUST to live up to the promise and expectations, it should be able to make the call, rather than leave it to the lobby in Washington.