

Interview

The Culture of the Kingdom

An Interview with His Excellency Dr. Abdulaziz Khoja,
Minister of Culture and Information, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



H.E. Dr. Abdulaziz Khoja

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to assuming his current post, Abdulaziz Khoja was Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon. In addition, he has worked as a chemistry teacher in the Faculty of Education in honorable Mecca and was appointed as Dean of the Faculty of Education and as General Supervisor of the University in Mecca. He has also worked as a teacher in King Abdulaziz University, assumed the position of the Undersecretary of the Information Ministry for Media Affairs, and was the General Director of Gulf Television. He was also the head of several councils, including the Executive Council of the Organization of Radio Stations in Islamic States and the Executive Council of International Islamic News Agency. He joined the diplomatic corps at the end of the '80s, when he was appointed as Ambassador to several states, including Turkey, the Soviet Union, and the Kingdom of Morocco. Abdulaziz Khoja is considered one of the most prominent poets in modern Saudi literature, and has several collections of poetry and published poems, in addition to some scientific writings in the fields of chemistry and reaction mechanism. He holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry and geology from the Riyadh University and a Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Birmingham.

Can you give a brief overview of your position as Saudi Minister of Culture and Information and the role of the Ministry of Culture and Information in Saudi Arabia?

Being in charge of the culture and information

sectors in the Kingdom gives me the opportunity to expose the culture, ideologies, traditions, and folklore of the people of Saudi Arabia, as well as bringing out the modernization movement that is led by His Majesty the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz. Moreover, this ministry carries huge responsibilities towards the local and international communities. One aspect is the dialogue initiative that King Abdullah has called for and we utilize all media means to establish and enhance bilateral dialogues with the nations of the world.

Outside of being a clear choice for energy-intensive industries, what might other types of future investors need to understand about the potential Saudi Arabia offers?

The Kingdom has a wealth of investment opportunities, both with regard to domestic and foreign investment. In the former dimension, there has been many deregulations and liberalization of markets such as the telecommunication sector. Currently, we at the Ministry of Culture and Information are actively looking into opportunities and challenges to deregulate the media market, which will happen very soon.

On the foreign investment side, the wisdom of the leaders of the Kingdom had sensed this for a long time and a royal decree had commenced a new era in the Kingdom by announcing an authority for investment called SAGIA (Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority) to facilitate the ways and means of attracting foreign investments to the Saudi market. SAGIA's success has been significant in a short period of time. In fact, they have climbed the competitiveness index to be among the leaders and their vision will be achieved soon. One substantial investment that the Kingdom has made is in its future generations, the skillful young people. The Saudi professionals have always proven to the world their professionalism, as well as their trustworthiness. These values are learned from the great verses of the Quran and the teachings of the Messenger of Allah, Prophet Mohammed.

King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz has directed the Saudi government to become one of the world's top 10 most competitive economies by 2010. What programs have you implemented and will you implement to make that a reality?

We have participated in all activities held in that respect, starting with media coverage of the competitiveness forum to preparing ministry individuals for competitiveness leadership.

We feel this global movement will fulfill a great responsibility in terms of positioning our nation in a remarkable spot on the global stage and in educating our people to be prepared for that. In media, we believe in responsible freedom. Media is responsible for societal values, beliefs, traditions, unity, and leadership. We become competitive if we intrinsically preserve those.

How has Saudi Arabia fared under the worldwide recession, and has it been insulated at all from the economic downturn?

We are part of the globe and hence we have been affected. The global recession has impacted all businesses and nations. We, in Saudi, have two strong factors that have served in mitigating the global risks: the wisdom of King Abdullah and his very well-educated decisions, which emerge from his patriotism and his true love for his nation; and the strong economic infrastructure put in place in the Kingdom such as the Jubail Industrial City. These factors have reinforced trust in the country's leadership.

Saudi Arabia has a young population, with 57 percent of the country under 25 years of age, and education has been an important focus for this reason. Does this increase the chances of a strong workforce base for future investment purposes?

This is one major national asset. In Saudi, we see our young population as an opportunity while other nations are faced with an aging population. When you look into any industry, there are four pillars to its success: venture capital, systems, technology, and the human element. The human element is always thought of as being inferior and less significant. However, in Saudi, we pay attention to building a skillful young workforce.

Should investors feel comfortable with the current political landscape in Saudi Arabia with regard to future investment?

The Kingdom is one of the most stable geopolitical landscapes and one of the most attractive economies due to its rich resources and the availability of highly qualified professionals. The success story in the petrochemical industry is a model for other investment arenas.

What do you see as the key priorities for the Ministry of Culture and Information over the coming year?

Our short term agenda is to deregulate the media sector, transform the ministry into the electronic age, and establish sound ties and strong bridges with the nations of the world. ●