



**AMERICAN  
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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **AUB Holds Panel Discussion on the Reform of Governance in Saudi Arabia**

The Good Governance and Citizenship Observatory (GGCO) at the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut (AUB) hosted a panel discussion titled *“Hawkama and Vision 2030: The Reform of Governance in Saudi Arabia.”* The event featured Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University Bernard Haykel, a leading expert on the Gulf and Middle East. The conversation explored how institutional reform and regulatory change are advancing transparency, accountability, and sustainable development as part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s broader transformation agenda.

The panel drew a distinguished audience, including Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Dr. Waleed Al-Bukhari; Spanish Ambassador to Lebanon Jesús Santos Aguado; Mexican Ambassador to Lebanon Francisco Romero Bock; Dr. Fadi Makki, Lebanon’s minister of state for administrative reform; and former ministers. Also in attendance were Dr. Fadlo Khuri, AUB president; Dr. Zaher Dawy, AUB provost; as well as university deans, senior administrators, and faculty members.

Director of the Asfari Institute Lina Abou-Habib opened the event by welcoming the attendees and highlighting the significance and timeliness of the discussion, describing it as “within the mandate of the institute, to discuss prospects, trends, and emerging initiatives that influence governance structures in the Arab region, particularly at this incredibly important moment of transition and instability.”

Dr. Simon Kachar, GGCO founding and current director, and lecturer in political science at AUB, followed with opening remarks that placed the discussion in a broader regional and institutional context. “In an era marked by rapid transformations and evolving global dynamics, understanding the nuances of governance reform becomes paramount,” he said. “Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 represents an ambitious and far-reaching blueprint for economic diversification and social change, and at its very core lies the fundamental pillar of governance.”

Kachar noted that the GGCO was established to foster critical thinking, encourage informed dialogue, and advance knowledge on good governance and active citizenship within Arab contexts. “We believe that genuine progress and sustainable development are linked to transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance structures,” he added.

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He emphasized that the panel provided an opportunity to examine how Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is being translated into practice and how governance reforms are reshaping institutions. "Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a forward-looking nation, globally integrated and domestically resilient," he said.

Dr. Fadlo Khuri, AUB president, then delivered his welcoming remarks, highlighting the panel's regional and global relevance. "Questions like how Vision 2030 is shaping Saudi Arabia in the region are extremely germane to what's happening in Lebanon and the entire region," he said. He added that understanding what is happening in Saudi Arabia is essential—not only for neighboring countries, but for the international community as a whole. "Saudi Arabia is a global concern," he noted.

He went on to commend the event's keynote guest, Professor Haykel, for his academic depth and candid insight. "I feel fortunate that today at AUB, we have arguably the most insightful expert—and also one of the most honest experts in the region. Not just academically qualified, but more than happy to share careful observations from a place of objectivity and great knowledge," Khuri added.

The panel discussion was moderated by Dr. Tania Haddad, associate professor of public administration and nonprofit management at AUB and member of the GGCO Steering Committee. She opened by framing the scope of the conversation: "Over the past decade, the kingdom has undertaken one of the most ambitious state-led transformation agendas in the region. Anchored in Vision 2030, these reforms span economic diversification, bureaucratic modernization, social liberalization, and institutional restructuring. This panel aims to critically examine the governance dimensions of these reforms, including their origins, mechanisms, and implications."

Haddad then introduced Professor Haykel as a prominent scholar of the Arabian Peninsula, whose work focuses on the politics, economics, and history of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Yemen, and "has critically engaged with questions of state reform, institutional change, and governance in the kingdom."

The discussion unfolded as a moderated, in-depth exchange, structured around four key themes central to understanding Saudi Arabia's governance reform trajectory. It began by examining the driving forces behind the reform agenda. Haykel traced the impetus to a growing realization among Saudi leadership—and increasingly, among the public—that the previous system of governance had become unsustainable.

"The driver for reform in Saudi Arabia is a sense that exists among the leadership—but I think it's also prevalent in society—that the country, as it was functioning before the accession of King Salman in 2015... was unsustainable, and that the country needed to dramatically change," Haykel said. He added that "what's particularly distinctive about the kingdom, and you don't find it in other countries of the GCC, is the brutal honesty with which the leadership in the kingdom talked about this need."

The conversation then explored how reforms have reshaped the relationship between the state and its citizens, particularly through the strategic deployment of nationalism, identity, and new narratives of civic responsibility. It also addressed the institutionalization of accountability, transparency, and citizen participation, and concluded with a reflection on the broader regional implications of the Saudi reform experience.

The event concluded with a question-and-answer session that invited reflections on the sustainability, implementation, and broader impact of the reforms.

## ENDS

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### **Note to Editors**

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 790 full-time faculty members and a student body of over 9000 students. AUB currently offers more than 140 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

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