



REVIEW AND REASSESSMENT OF MIT’S RELATIONSHIPS WITH  
THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA:  
A REPORT TO PRESIDENT L. RAFAEL REIF

Professor Richard K. Lester  
Associate Provost

January 31, 2019

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January 31, 2019

President L. Rafael Reif  
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**RE: SUMMARY OF COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM THE MIT COMMUNITY ON  
THE PRELIMINARY REPORT ON MIT'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE KINGDOM  
OF SAUDI ARABIA**

Dear Rafael,

I am writing to summarize the comments I have received in the weeks since my preliminary report on MIT's relationships with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was released to the MIT community.

You requested this review on October 15, 2018 to help you formulate a course of action for MIT on this issue. On December 6, 2018 I shared my report with the faculty, staff and students of the Institute, and I invited all members of the community to comment on its findings. The comment period concluded on January 15, 2019.

I have been greatly impressed by the wide range of people who have taken the time to submit comments on this matter. From freshmen to retired alums, from graduate students and postdocs to administrative staff, members of the faculty, and research staff, these commenters have expressed their views with care, clarity, and conviction. I believe this response is a testament to the strength of our community.

I have received 111 separate comments since December 6. The signers included 42 faculty members, 23 undergraduate and graduate students, 23 postdocs, research and teaching staff, 22 administrative staff, and 10 alums. Altogether, 123 people submitted comments.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the editors of *The Tech* published an online editorial on January 15 calling for MIT to cut its ties to the Saudi government.

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<sup>1</sup> Almost all of the comments were signed by a single individual, but two were signed by groups (in both cases, the groups consisted of faculty members.) All but three of the signers were clearly affiliated with MIT in one way or another. Classifying the comments as simply 'for' or 'against' the preliminary report is difficult, as many expressed support for some of the recommendations while disagreeing with others. Of the faculty commenters, 24 of the 42 were strongly opposed to a continuation of relations with the Saudi government, and another 7 seemed generally to lean against this recommendation. Of the non-faculty commenters, a similar majority (roughly 76%) were either strongly opposed to this recommendation or leaned against it.

In this letter I will focus primarily on the comments that are critical, as I think this will be most useful to you as you decide on a course of action for MIT. I will highlight nine topics:

1. MIT's Saudi relationships have elicited deep concern on our campus
2. More information about funding
3. Questions about MIT's contribution to Saudi modernization and questions about the impact of terminating our Saudi relationships
4. The limits of cost-benefit analysis
5. Will MIT speak out against the Saudi government's conduct?
6. Working with the Saudi government: where to draw the line?
7. Who should decide: the faculty or the administration?
8. A stronger review process
9. Can we be guided by general principles, applicable in all situations?

My conclusions and recommendations are summarized at the end of the letter.

### **1. MIT's Saudi relationships have elicited deep concern on our campus**

Many commenters are appalled by the conduct of the Saudi government and are deeply troubled that MIT's relationships with this government might in any way be enabling such behavior. They find it very difficult to reconcile MIT's mission to work effectively for the benefit of humankind with what is occurring on the ground in Saudi Arabia and in neighboring Yemen. The words some respondents used to describe their views – 'sickened', 'outraged', 'embarrassed', 'ashamed' -- make clear the depth of feelings elicited by the situation. These reactions are linked partly to the Khashoggi assassination and attempted coverup but also to the atrocities perpetrated against civilians in Yemen, and the repression of human rights, the absence of basic rights of self-determination for women, the persecution of Saudi LBGTQ citizens, and the attacks on free speech in the Kingdom. Some commenters, even as they acknowledge that many governments around the world abuse their own citizens and others, assert that the Saudi government is among the world's worst violators of human rights. Others want to know whether there is any threshold of misconduct by the Saudi government beyond which MIT would be unwilling to engage. From the comments received, it is clear that MIT's connections to the Saudi government have caused deep unease within our community.

## **2. More Information about funding**

Some commenters expressed satisfaction that the report provided a comprehensive account of our Saudi-related activities, but others complained that it did not provide enough information about the funding we receive from Saudi sources, especially those associated with the government. As you know, we generally do not disclose detailed information about the amounts of funding provided by research sponsors and philanthropic donors. But in this case it seems important to provide more information, especially since some respondents have suggested that the preliminary report's recommendations have been primarily motivated by the Institute's financial self-interest ('[w]hat we are conveying . . . is that money is more important than human life', 'MIT's name must continue to stand for something higher than shallow pragmatism'). Others worry that, even if this is not actually the case, it will nevertheless be perceived that way.

In fact, if we were to terminate all of our current revenue-generating relationships with Saudi government agencies, government-owned or affiliated organizations, and universities, MIT's annual operating budget would decline by roughly 0.2%. The exact amount of funding from Saudi Arabia has fluctuated from year to year, but averaged over the last three years the three largest government-related sources of funds have been Saudi Aramco and its Houston-based subsidiary Aramco Services (~\$5M/year); the Saudi national science agency and laboratory King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) (~\$2.4M/year); and SABIC, a chemical producer majority-owned by the Saudi government (~\$0.5M/year).

In the most recent fiscal year, we received a total of ~\$7.2M in sponsored research support from Saudi sources. There were 5 sponsors – the three government-related entities listed above, and two Saudi universities – and these funds provided support for 48 MIT principal investigators.<sup>2</sup> This funding has certainly been important for many of these individual investigators and their students, and stopping it would surely be disruptive to their research. But the impact of cutting off all such funding on MIT as a whole would be minor. I hope these facts make clear, notwithstanding claims to the contrary, that financial considerations are not driving the recommendation not to terminate MIT's relationships with the Saudi government.

## **3. Questions about MIT's contribution to Saudi modernization and questions about the impact of decoupling**

One of the arguments in favor of engaging with our Saudi sponsors and donors is that the research which results from these engagements and, no less important, the human connections and the human capital development that they facilitate, contribute to economic and social progress in Saudi Arabia. My report mentions, for example, that a fellowship program now funded by KACST is enabling Saudi women holding a doctoral degree in science and engineering to spend a year on the MIT campus doing research, and that KACST also supports

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<sup>2</sup> Fee income principally associated with the Industrial Liaison Program and executive education programs accounted for another \$1.0M in FY18.

advanced graduate training for Saudi students at MIT. We are aware, too, that some of our Saudi alums have gone on to senior roles in government, industry, and finance in their country.

Many of the commenters agreed with the report's conclusion that economic and social progress in Saudi Arabia will be enabled through engagement. They point to other examples such as MIT's contribution to the development of King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), the impact of joint research with MIT on the country's research and development programs, and MIT-enabled opportunities for students and young professionals to participate in entrepreneurship activities in the Kingdom.

Some commenters cited their experiences working with Saudi Aramco. They describe it as a technologically advanced organization espousing Western values that is both world-renowned in its field and an important socially progressive force in Saudi Arabia. One noted his productive interactions with women engineers and women in corporate leadership positions at the company. According to another, 'Saudi Aramco is in many ways a model for what Saudi Arabia hopes to be.' From this perspective, MIT's engagement with Aramco is seen as an effective pathway for the Institute to help contribute to Saudi modernization efforts.

But others explicitly rejected such arguments, suggesting that they are overstated and self-serving. Despite the examples given in the report, one commenter asked '[i]s there any evidence whatsoever for this view [that MIT is educating potential reformers]?' Another asserted, based on his experience growing up in East Germany, that our relationships with state-owned organizations in the Kingdom bestow benefits only very selectively ('it is clear that such highly controlled and prestigious programs. . . benefit primarily highly opportunistic members of the Saudi Arabian (scientific) community, which eventually only cements the current web of authority.'). One commenter argued specifically that the relationship with Aramco 'doesn't rise to the standard of activities that are positive for KSA's future political and social development'. Another group of commenters urged that MIT's capacity to promote change be assessed at a 'structural and institutional level', and at that level found it 'highly implausible' that MIT's relationships will contribute to progressive social and political change in Saudi Arabia. But the modest scale of our engagement with the Kingdom suggests that this may not be a realistic benchmark, and that it would be more appropriate to evaluate MIT's impact based on the individual contributions of the relatively small number of individual Saudis we educate and with whom we connect.

While some commenters argued that the report overstated the beneficial impact of MIT's engagements, others took issue with it for *understating* the potential influence of a decision by MIT to end those relationships; they criticized as speculative the statement in the report that such a break would be unlikely to have a meaningful ameliorative effect on Saudi policies. In the view of these commenters, termination would on the contrary empower Saudi opponents of these policies to put pressure on others in the Saudi government to change ("they need to be able to say: 'look -- we are losing friends!"). These commenters believe that a decision by MIT to end those relationships would gain widespread attention and would enable the Institute to present and defend its commitment to principles such as free speech in a prominent way. They argue, moreover, that this would 'not only provoke other institutions to step up, but would show Saudi Arabia that its deeds have consequences.' Some commenters insisted that MIT has 'an

internationally recognized voice’, that ‘when MIT speaks, the world listens’, and that we should use that voice for the good.

While these arguments about the power of MIT’s voice and actions are generally presented as assertions, without specific evidence, I must also acknowledge the speculative nature of my own judgement as to the limited effect of a cutoff on Saudi policy. I think we might agree that *both* sets of views regarding the practical impact of a cutoff of MIT activity are inherently speculative. This question would surely benefit from closer study by experts on Saudi social and political development.

#### **4. Should MIT speak out against the Saudi government’s conduct?**

Effectiveness in inducing change in the Kingdom is not the only factor to consider in evaluating our options. One group of commenters introduced a useful distinction between the ‘expressive’ and the ‘instrumental’ power of MIT’s actions. From this perspective, whether or not a statement of condemnation or a decision to end our engagements would help change the government’s behavior (instrumental power), it *would* make clear that the values we stand for as an institution are antithetical to the conduct of the Saudi regime (expressive power).

Some commenters do indeed argue that what is now most important is for the Institute to express its views as forcefully as possible, and what is of most concern about the present situation – more, indeed, than any particular program or relationship -- is that MIT might fail to speak out against the conduct of the Saudi government. (‘At this juncture, MIT has to do something to signal to the world its revulsion at this particular event and at the overall tenor of Saudi authoritarianism.’). They believe that MIT will be judged – and some suggest that they themselves will judge MIT – as much if not more by what we say than by any particular actions we may take. Conversely, *not* speaking out strongly, in this view, is tantamount to tacit approval of Saudi actions.

Some commenters go further, urging MIT to be a leader in sending a message to the Saudi regime that its policies are unacceptable. According to one: “If we terminate our connections with the Saudi monarchy, we could be one of the strongest voices in the US condemning the kingdom’s recent actions. The lack of action on the part of much of the US and the world means that we have a chance here to make a stand against tyranny and oppressiveness that we are not often given. And there is a chance that action on our part could influence other international players to similarly cut ties with the Saudi government.”

I respectfully disagree with such views. It is understandable that members of our community who feel strongly about Saudi policies and actions and who also feel a deep sense of admiration for and connection to MIT should want to see the Institute playing a leading role in public denunciations of the Saudi regime. But I believe that it is problematic for the administration to seek to advance a policy goal or articulate a position on behalf of the Institute on the public stage, unless the topic bears directly on our core academic mission, such as anti-discrimination (including immigration) and freedom of speech and inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This is not a call for silence or self-censorship. Many MIT faculty regularly speak in the public domain on their fields of expertise. Moreover, we are fortunate to live in a society in which every member of our

However, I have come to believe that in this particular case there is a compelling reason for the administration to speak out on behalf of the Institute in broader terms, because our relationship with the Kingdom is sufficiently visible that, if we do not explicitly dissociate ourselves from the behavior of the Saudi regime, there will be nothing to prevent the Saudis or anyone else from suggesting or inferring that we condone or endorse it. We must not allow ourselves to be defined by our utility to any sovereign state or to any other organization, and we may sometimes need to take exceptional measures to avoid this. This is one such case.

There should be absolutely no basis for anyone at MIT (or anywhere else in the world) to doubt the profound dismay across the MIT community concerning the conduct of the Saudi regime in the matter of the Khashoggi assassination, the war in Yemen, and human rights violations in Saudi Arabia itself, and we should therefore make this clear. We can speak out in this way and still continue to develop our educational and research connections with individuals and organizations in the Kingdom.

I do not make this recommendation to speak out lightly. The potential for retaliatory actions by the Saudi government means that criticism of its conduct may elevate the risks facing Saudi members of the MIT community.<sup>4</sup> An important lesson here is that we should take care to avoid situations in the future in which we are forced to choose between the reputational risks to the Institute of not speaking out and the risks to members of our community of doing so.

## 5. The limits of cost-benefit analysis

Some commenters, though silent on the risk trade-off I describe above, objected more generally to the report's attempt to weigh the benefits of our Saudi relationships against the associated costs and risks, including the opportunity costs of not severing those ties. A distinguished group of our philosophy faculty argued that to rely entirely on cost-benefit analysis is "to embrace a crude and untenable consequentialism." They, and others, observed that the violation of human rights carries "a special moral weight that cannot be offset by potential gains of other sorts", including "imagined economic and social gains".

There can be no doubt that human and civil rights violations raise unique moral questions and as such demand special consideration. But these considerations cannot be divorced from other dimensions of the situation. To take a simple example, suppose MIT were considering a collaboration with a foreign government known to be engaged in systematic human rights violations, in which the collaboration had the potential to achieve significant contributions to climate change mitigation through economic and technical means. In such a situation some might argue that the benefits of climate change mitigation were trumped by the violation of human rights, and that above a certain threshold the violations would disqualify the government as a partner of MIT altogether, regardless of the benefits, while others would assign higher

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community is free to express him or herself in public on *any* issue, such as calling out wrongdoing when they see it. Individuals can speak out; groups of students and staff and research groups can speak out; committees of the faculty can speak out; the faculty as a whole can speak out.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-saudi-governments-global-campaign-to-silence-its-critics>

priority to the potential benefits of the collaboration. The point here is not to debate the merits of either position, but rather to suggest that choices do need to be made, and that in practice human rights considerations must be part of a broader calculus. We should expect such choices to be made thoughtfully and not crudely. But they cannot be avoided.

## **6. Working with the Saudi government: Where to draw the line?**

The specific recommendations proposed in the report generated many comments and a wide range of reactions.

A number of commenters expressed support for the report's views as a whole. Many other commenters strongly supported particular recommendations – that we should continue to bring Saudi students and researchers to campus, that we should continue to work with private donors, that we should not undertake large engagements in the Kingdom requiring the physical presence of substantial numbers of MIT people there – while disagreeing with the recommendation that we should allow our existing relationships with the Saudi government to continue as long as faculty members remain willing to lead those projects.

Some commenters thought that we could continue to receive Saudi government funding for Saudi students and postdocs at MIT, but that we should terminate all other government relationships, including those providing support for research at MIT. Others thought that all these relationships should continue but that we shouldn't start anything new, at least for now. Still others thought that existing projects 'should see some repercussions' too.

Others drew a line elsewhere: "I think it is fine to accept research funding . . . except for military and surveillance-related research, with normal MIT conditions that the funding can be used to support any MIT student or postdoc regardless of citizenship or gender, and that all the results will be published."

MIT does not currently have any direct engagements with the central leadership of the Kingdom, nor will we in the future unless conditions change. One commenter, arguing against future projects of this type, said that 'we should continue to carefully review whether our engagements with Saudi enterprises, universities, or private donors constitute such a direct link'. Avoiding such a link is consistent with the report's recommendations. But some respondents disagreed with another of the report's recommendations, that we should continue our existing relationships with the Saudi government agency KACST, the state-owned enterprise Aramco, and SABIC, a public company majority-owned by the state.

Some of these commenters rejected the idea that organizations like KACST and Aramco can be meaningfully separated from the central leadership of the country ('it is not possible to distinguish government agencies from the person of the Crown Prince'.) They argue that these organizations are core institutions of Saudi Arabia and represent the state. In this view, although these organizations are not themselves responsible for Saudi involvement in the war in Yemen or Jamal Khashoggi's murder, they are controlled by the entity that ultimately is responsible, the Saudi monarchy, and in partnering with them MIT is in effect partnering with the monarchy.



In this view, the fact that these organizations do not drive or control the Saudi government actions that are abhorrent to our community is not relevant. To some of these commenters, any connection at all – even that of a university with a royal patron -- is sufficient to taint the funds we are offered, so that, in their view, accepting these funds and applying them to worthwhile uses constitutes complicity in a form of ‘moral money laundering.’

Other commenters argue that as long as the funds are allocated in a responsible way, and are subject to normal MIT conditions regarding publication, absence of gender discrimination, and so on, questions about the provenance of the funds are less important. In this view, it is unrealistic to expect organizations from which we accept funds to share all the values of our own institution. What is important is to ensure that the funds are used in a way that meets our standards.

### **7. Who should decide: The faculty or the administration?**

Who at MIT should decide which views should prevail – especially given the range of views in our community? For current projects, my report recommends that as long as faculty want to continue leading these projects they should be allowed to do so, provided that the projects remain in compliance with all relevant laws and regulations and continue to be consistent with MIT policies and procedures.

As noted above, a number of commenters called for all of our projects with the Saudi government to be terminated, presumably through administrative action. None commented directly on whether they thought the principal investigators (PIs) should have a role in those decisions (although some applauded the report’s recommendation that MIT should provide financial and other help to faculty wishing to withdraw so as to minimize disruption to students and others.)

The principle that our faculty should be permitted to pursue their intellectual interests and objectives without interference is among the most fundamental operating principles of our Institute. Of course, this is not an unalloyed right. Sometimes the administration does say no to faculty research proposals. But for ongoing research projects that are initiated and led by faculty, as is the case here, I expect our faculty would broadly agree that the bar for administrative intervention to terminate such projects should be set very high. Those calling for termination appear to think that this bar has been exceeded; it is not clear whether any of them weighed concerns about the administration overriding the autonomy of faculty, since none of them mentioned it. I disagree with these calls for top-down termination and continue to recommend that decisions on whether or not to continue current projects should be left principally to the faculty PIs. Possible renewals of these engagements, as well as potential new projects, should be carefully reviewed by both the faculty and the administration. (Aramco’s membership of the MIT Energy Initiative may shortly be considered for renewal, and other engagements may be up for extension or renewal in the relatively near future.)

## 8. A stronger review process

Several commenters urged a strengthening of the review process that MIT uses to consider its engagements with Saudi Arabia. Some called for the creation of a new committee, including broad representation from across the MIT community, to assess all of MIT's Saudi relationships.

Over the past 18 months we have in fact been strengthening our internal review processes in anticipation of the need to deal with more of these kinds of complex and challenging international engagements, involving a range of countries in addition to Saudi Arabia. In the fall of 2017 we implemented the recommendation of the *Global Strategy for MIT* report<sup>5</sup> to strengthen the International Advisory Committee, which as you know was created in 2007 in part to address an earlier Saudi engagement.

The International Advisory Committee (IAC) has been re-constituted as a faculty-led, standing committee of the Institute to provide a strong faculty voice in advising the senior administration on the implications of international engagements for our core academic mission of teaching, research, and service. The IAC, which is chaired by Professor Rohan Abeyaratne, includes two faculty members from each of the Institute's five Schools, and incorporates faculty knowledge of several regions of the world where MIT is active. More recently, we have been upgrading our administrative review procedures by requiring all major international engagements that may pose significant institutional risks to MIT to be reviewed by a group of senior administrators. These committees will consider and help inform decisions about the renewal of existing relationships with Saudi Arabia, as well as proposed new Saudi engagements.

One commenter recommends that 'engagements that do not allow MIT community members to participate fully and equally in all activities and opportunities should receive the highest level of scrutiny'. I agree with this recommendation, especially as it applies to projects that require travel to the Kingdom by MIT investigators. In at least one previous case involving such travel, full participation in the project required some participants to hide certain aspects of their identity; opportunities to participate in social events linked to the project were restricted by gender; and in a variety of settings female MIT faculty researchers were not accorded the same civil rights as their male MIT faculty colleagues.

Based on her experiences working on projects in Saudi Arabia, one commenter pointed out that, 'if MIT participants cannot bring their whole selves and all aspects of their identity to their work, they will not be able to be as successful in their academic and intellectual pursuits.' When a proposed project only involves a single investigator, that individual can decide for him or herself whether such restrictions are acceptable. But if a project involves the expectation of travel by multiple MIT investigators, the principal investigator should be required to present for consideration by the reviewing committees a written explanation of why such restrictions should be tolerated, and a plan for managing them. In general, such cases will not pass muster.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://web.mit.edu/globalstrategy/index.html>

It is especially important to consider the impacts on junior faculty and students, who may feel obliged to participate in a given project, despite personal misgivings. For projects above a certain scale, it may also be important to consider the possibility that situations encountered and tolerated in the Kingdom will have corrosive effects on MIT's internal community and culture.

### **9. Can we be guided by general principles, applicable in all situations?**

Some commenters expressed concern about singling out Saudi Arabia for special treatment. One commenter saw 'no justification' for focusing on Saudi Arabia alone and demanded an 'objective basis' for these decisions, otherwise those 'screaming loudest or applying their own subjective moral outrage to pressure the Institute' in particular cases will risk putting MIT 'on a dangerous path'. Another commenter asked specifically for a policy towards Turkey, which in this view would otherwise be rewarded 'in its regional competition with the Saudi Kingdom' by an exclusive focus on Saudi abuses.

Other respondents called for a general standard governing MIT's relations with all governments and other organizations that engage in consistent and serious human rights violations. One commenter, recognizing the difficulty of these problems, called for a research program to consider how universities should draw the line in their interactions with governments and others when civil and human rights violations are involved. In a collective comment, nine members of our distinguished history faculty, referring to the work of Professor Craig Wilder and his students revealing the moral challenge presented by slavery in the early history of the Institute, wondered whether complicity with authoritarian regimes will turn out to be the moral litmus test for the present generation at MIT.

### **A General Caution**

As I write this letter, I am traveling in China. I am struck by the many conversations I have had with Chinese colleagues – highly educated, well-informed, and sophisticated colleagues – in which their views of the United States seem at once idiosyncratic and caricatured, and, often, a little off-key. As I listen to my Chinese friends speak of America, I cannot help but wonder how well almost any of us, as Americans, understand Saudi Arabia. I suspect that we know it much less well than we might think. Here at MIT we are fortunate that some of our own faculty have spent significant amounts of time in the Kingdom, and we have their first-hand testimony to draw on, as well as that of our Saudi students and post-docs. What emerges from these accounts is more nuanced than much of what is being said about that country in the press. The picture is one of a very complex society undergoing wrenching transitions and facing enormous social and economic challenges. While many see only harsh repression, others see evidence of significant social progress in some areas. It is not easy to understand this situation, especially from the outside. So, as we develop and implement a course of action for MIT, we need to recognize that we almost certainly do not have the Kingdom, its government, and Saudi society in clear focus. We should draw to the degree possible on the knowledge of those in our community and others who know the country best, and we should keep in mind the limits of what we know.

## Recommendations

I have weighed the comments I have received carefully. In some instances, I have sought further clarification through conversations with respondents. My overall conclusion is that, notwithstanding the articulate and powerful arguments to the contrary presented by some commenters, the core recommendations in my preliminary report (attached here) remain sound, though it will also be important to provide the community with more information in some instances, as I have done here with the financial data.

Taken together, these comments have also led me to suggest four additional recommendations.

Let me restate my original recommendations, followed by the new ones.

### I. Original recommendations:

1. We should continue to welcome outstanding Saudi students and researchers, as well as appropriate Saudi visitors, to our campus.
2. I recommend against terminating any of our existing engagements with private Saudi donors and sponsors.
3. Concerning our existing projects with the state entities KACST, Aramco, and SABIC, as long as the faculty PIs remain willing to lead these projects, they should be allowed to do so. If any PIs decide that they do not wish to continue in light of recent events, the Institute should work with them to minimize the resulting disruption to the research and to affected personnel, including most importantly our students, while also taking account of our contractual commitments.
4. We should not consider large engagements in Saudi Arabia requiring the physical presence of MIT people for substantial periods of time until conditions on the ground in the Kingdom have changed significantly.
5. We should be willing to consider new educational and research engagements with private Saudi sponsors or donors that are primarily conducted at MIT, as long as faculty are willing to lead them, and as long as the activities comply with MIT policies and principles and relevant laws and regulations. We should also be willing to consider new or renewed engagements with Saudi government entities like KACST, Aramco and SABIC that are primarily conducted at MIT under these same conditions.

An additional point that was not included in the December report: for engagements involving both private and government sponsors, new or renewal proposals will need to be reviewed by the faculty-led International Advisory Committee for compatibility with MIT's academic mission, as well as by the senior administrative committee concerned with institutional risk. If the proposed engagement entails significant travel to the Kingdom by multiple MIT participants, the principal investigator will need to

demonstrate, in a written impact statement, that other investigators, including students and faculty, will not be disqualified or disadvantaged in any way through their participation, and that any potential adverse impact on MIT's community and culture will be minimal.

II. Further recommendations:

1. We should go on record with a statement to the MIT faculty and community making clear that MIT abhors the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, the human rights violations in the Kingdom, and the policies and practices pursued by the Saudi government that have caused or contributed to the mass suffering, starvation, and death of civilians in Yemen, and that while MIT may continue to pursue research and educational engagements with sponsors, donors, and collaborators in the Kingdom, we will judge those activities on their merits and will reject attempts to paint them as endorsements of behavior that the Institute finds abhorrent.
2. We should continue to strengthen our internal processes for reviewing and evaluating potential engagements, or renewals of existing engagements, with countries whose governments are engaged in serious human rights violations.
3. We should invite the MIT faculty to undertake a program of research on how universities should draw the line in their interactions with governments and others when civil and human rights violations are involved. We hope that such studies might be of interest to an interdisciplinary group of faculty, including members of our philosophy, history, political science, anthropology, and international security units.
4. In new contractual relationships with foreign government entities, we should incorporate broad termination rights that we can exercise summarily if untenable situations arise.

I hope, Rafael, that these thoughts and recommendations are helpful to you as you undertake the difficult task of determining a path forward for MIT in this complex and sensitive area. I am of course available to help further in any way. And I do want to emphasize that even those commenters most strongly opposed to the findings in my December report appreciated that MIT was opening the question for community comment. In almost all of the comments, the voices were of those who care deeply about MIT, its mission, and its values. I hope it will be possible to draw on this shared sense of purpose and commitment to find a way forward.

Sincerely,



Richard K. Lester

## REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

[Preliminary – distributed for MIT community comment]

Professor Richard K. Lester  
Associate Provost for International Activities

December 6, 2018

To President Rafael Reif:

This short report presents the results of a review and reassessment of MIT's relationships with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. You requested this review on October 15, 2018, following the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul two weeks earlier. The review focuses primarily on the larger-scale activities that MIT is carrying out with the Kingdom. A full list of these activities is presented in Table 1. Not included are short-term or one-off visits, occasional lectures, and participation in conferences in Saudi Arabia by individual members of the MIT community.

In carrying out this review, I sought and received input and advice from a broad range of MIT faculty, students, staff, and alums. I also consulted the faculty International Advisory Committee. I am grateful for the thoughtful, careful, sometimes searing, but always civil comments offered by members of the MIT community. Although opinions on the situation and what to do about it varied widely, those who commented were united in wanting the best for MIT. I also sought the advice of external experts on Saudi Arabia and the region. An important source of information and insight was *The Tech*, whose coverage of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to the MIT campus in March, and more recent coverage of the Khashoggi murder and its implications for MIT, has been thoughtful and informative. Though many people made valuable contributions to this review, the conclusions and recommendations are my own.

I am making this report available to the MIT community for comment. I will then forward the report, together with a summary of comments received, to you for your consideration. It will, of course, be up to you as president to decide on the course of action MIT will follow on this matter.

Some colleagues have wondered why the Khashoggi murder has triggered this reassessment, when other events and circumstances both in the Kingdom and elsewhere that might have

provoked similar reassessments did not do so. In Saudi Arabia itself, large-scale violations of political, civil, and human rights have been extensively documented over a long period, and since 2015 the Saudi military has been a major participant in the devastating civil war in neighboring Yemen, a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of civilian casualties and left millions more on the brink of starvation. To some, a reassessment of our Saudi relationships seems long overdue.

One reason for conducting this review now is that MIT had previously been considering a significant expansion of our relationships with the Kingdom. An influential view during these discussions was that, notwithstanding evidence of continued internal repression and external aggression, Saudi Arabia was on a path toward becoming a more progressive society, and that by expanding our engagement with the Kingdom we might contribute to this development, even if only in a small way. The Khashoggi murder has deflated many of those hopes. There were also the particular facts of this case, notably the combination of brazenness, brutality, and contempt for international opinion that made it stand out even within the crowded global gallery of official malevolence. There was, moreover, a disturbing sense of connection between the killing in Istanbul and the MIT campus. One of those individuals now known to have played a leading role in Mr. Khashoggi's murder in Istanbul had been part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's entourage during the latter's visit to the MIT campus.<sup>1</sup> This individual had engaged with members of the MIT community at that time—an unwelcome and unsettling intrusion into our space, even though evident only in retrospect.

In light of the events surrounding the Khashoggi assassination and its aftermath, and taking account of other relevant information, the question addressed in this report is whether MIT should continue its engagement with Saudi Arabia. What are the benefits of these activities to MIT and to Saudi society? Are they outweighed by the potential for negative impacts, including the possible costs to our reputation and the possibility that those in Saudi Arabia who may share in the responsibility for these events could derive some benefit from their association with MIT—an impact that we would surely wish to avoid?

I am writing this report at a time when the facts about the Khashoggi murder are still emerging. The question of culpability may continue to be disputed, but it is also possible that a complete account may become available at some point. Perceptions will likely change over time, as these events recede from public view and fresh outrages claim the world's attention. The situation in the volatile Gulf region will also change. The findings I report here may need to be revisited as additional information becomes available in the future.

## **1. Support from Saudi Arabia for MIT activities**

As I mentioned in my letter informing the faculty of this review, MIT has enjoyed highly productive educational and research collaborations with colleagues and sponsors from Saudi Arabia over many decades. The Institute has also derived much benefit from the presence of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm547>

many outstanding Saudi students and researchers on our campus, and the Saudi students, faculty, and staff currently working here in Cambridge are valued members of the MIT community.

Today MIT is also conducting multiple activities with Saudi Arabian organizations. These can be grouped into three broad categories: sponsored research, philanthropic relationships, and a miscellaneous group of other activities (see Table 1).

#### **a. Sponsored research**

Measured by annual rate of expenditure, the largest share of MIT's activities with Saudi Arabian organizations takes the form of sponsored research projects carried out on the MIT campus. These projects are led by MIT faculty members or senior research scientists. Typically they involve post-docs and/or graduate student research assistants, and some may also involve undergraduates. As most readers of this report will know, sponsored research is carried out under agreements between MIT and the sponsor that specify the area of work, the broad objectives of the research, and other terms under which the work is to be done, including the amount and timing of funding to cover research costs and the disposition of any intellectual property that may result. MIT does not grant sponsors any right to exert influence over the manner of performance of the work or its results. The agreements also guarantee the right of the researchers to publish their findings in the open literature. Sponsored research enables MIT, the sponsor, the scientific community, and the general public to benefit from new scientific discoveries and the development of new technologies. Sponsored research projects also provide important educational opportunities for MIT students.

The largest Saudi sponsors of research at MIT are: Saudi Aramco, the state-owned company that is the world's biggest oil and gas producer; King Abdulaziz City of Science and Technology (KACST), the Saudi national science agency and national laboratory; and SABIC, one of the world's largest chemical producers. Other research sponsors are Saudi universities, primarily King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM).

The research projects supported by these sponsors cover a broad range of scientific and engineering topics. Saudi Aramco, which in recent years has been the largest Saudi funder of sponsored research at MIT, has supported faculty-led projects in fields including computer simulation of oil and gas reservoirs, catalysis, and carbon capture technology. Saudi Aramco is also a founding member of the MIT Energy Initiative (MITEI). The KACST relationship established the Center for Complex Engineering Systems (CCES) within MIT's Institute for Data Systems and Society (IDSS). A parallel center was established at KACST. At MIT, CCES provides support for research on computer simulation and data analytics and visualization ranging across domains including public health, urban water management, urban mobility, electric power systems, and regional climate change impacts. Also funded under the KACST agreement, five or six Saudi



students each year (selected from an annual application pool of about 1,500) are invited to work with MIT faculty and students over a two-year period of advanced graduate training, which is typically followed by the admission of these students to graduate science and engineering programs at leading universities in the U.S. and Europe. Since the KACST program was launched, 15 of these students have been admitted to MIT, of whom 60% are women. Other research relationships have included participation in a research consortium at the MIT Media Laboratory by the MiSK Foundation, a non-profit organization founded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The MiSK Foundation's membership in this consortium ended recently.

Over the last three years, sponsored research projects funded by Saudi organizations accounted for 52% of all Saudi-funded expenditures at MIT. In FY18, these sponsored research projects involved 28 MIT principal investigators.<sup>2</sup>

#### **b. Gifts**

MIT has received gifts from Saudi Arabian sources, including both private and corporate gifts. MIT alumnus Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel '78, a Saudi businessman and philanthropist, has funded a number of important programs at MIT through the social enterprise organization, Community Jameel, of which he is chair. Community Jameel has supported the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Laboratory (J-PAL) at MIT since 2005, the Abdul Latif Jameel Water and Food Systems Laboratory (J-WAFS) since 2014, the Abdul Latif Jameel World Education Lab (J-WEL) since 2017, and most recently the Abdul Lateef Jameel Clinic for Machine Learning in Health (J-Clinic), launched in September 2018. The endowment of these programs by Community Jameel has enabled MIT to enter important new fields of research on a substantial scale, and to attract additional support from governments, foundations, and individuals for this research, with beneficial impacts felt around the world. For example, J-PAL, the oldest of the Jameel family of programs, works to reduce poverty by conducting randomized impact evaluations to test and improve the impact of social policies and programs. J-PAL has built out a network of 171 professors at 49 universities on five continents pursuing research of this same type, and it now has affiliated offices in Africa, Europe, South Asia, Southeast Asia, North America, and Latin America. Mohammed Jameel has also created separate endowed funds for student scholarships and fellowships at MIT.

MIT has established the Ibn Khaldun Fellowship Program for Saudi Arabian women. The program began under a research collaboration with King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), but it was significantly expanded by a subsequent gift from Saudi Aramco. Today, it is supported by a gift from the King Abdulaziz City of Science and Technology (KACST). This competitive fellowship program, open to Saudi women holding a doctoral degree in science or engineering, funds each Ibn Khaldun Fellow to

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<sup>2</sup> Since issuing this report on December 6, I discovered a typographical error in this sentence; the correct figure for the number of MIT principal investigators is 48, not 28. (RKL, on 1.31.19)

spend a year doing research on the MIT campus in collaboration with an MIT faculty member. The program helps the Fellows to develop as leaders in research, teaching, and technical management. Since its inception the Ibn Khaldun Fellowship program has supported 27 Saudi women fellows at MIT.

Other gifts to MIT, funded mostly by Saudi alums, also play an important role in supporting a wide range of activities at MIT, including undergraduate scholarships and graduate fellowships.

Altogether, activities funded by gifts from Saudi Arabian donors accounted for 44% of all Saudi-related expenditures at MIT over the past three years. This includes contributions from expendable gifts made during this period, as well as endowment distributions from prior gifts.

#### **c. Other relationships**

Other programs have accounted for the remaining 4% of Saudi-funded activity at MIT over the past three years. These have included three Saudi memberships of MIT's Industrial Liaison Program (Saudi Aramco, SABIC, and the Olayan Financing Group); and Saudi participation in MIT executive education programs, including the participation of two Saudi city teams (from Al Madinah and King Abdullah Economic City) in the Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program. In the Kingdom itself, our alumni/ae participate in the MIT Club of Saudi Arabia.

#### **d. Possible new engagements**

During the past year, MIT considered entering into a new relationship in Saudi Arabia involving NEOM, a large new economic development project on the Red Sea coast of the Kingdom championed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. However, MIT is not considering Institute-level involvement in the NEOM project at this time.<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to MIT in March 2018 there was considerable speculation about new relationships between MIT and Saudi Arabia that the visit had enabled. In fact, four agreements were signed during that visit, but only one concerned a new activity—a one-year-long research project sponsored by SABIC to support an MIT faculty member to design and test a novel reactor for combustion pyrolysis of methane. A second agreement extended the existing KACST-sponsored research program in IDSS through 2028. Another agreement with KACST renewed the Ibn Khaldun Fellowship Program for Saudi Arabian women for another 10 years. The fourth agreement was a letter of intent to renew Saudi Aramco's founding membership of MITEI for another five years. The MITEI membership renewal has not

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<sup>3</sup> Two members of the MIT community have served in a private capacity on the advisory board to the NEOM project. Both recently announced that they have suspended their participation on this board.

been finalized at this point in time. If it is renewed, the funds will again mainly be used for sponsored research projects, and the scale of funding will be the same as it was during the past five years. At various times there has been discussion of the possibility of augmenting the existing sponsored research relationship between Saudi Aramco and MITEI with a major new program in the field of environmental sustainability. However, no plans for this are currently in place.

## 2. Assessment

The larger context for evaluating these activities is MIT's general strategy for engaging with the world, as described in the document titled *A Global Strategy for MIT* (May 2017).<sup>4</sup> As noted in that document, learning about the world, helping to solve the world's greatest problems, and working with international collaborators who share our curiosity and commitment to rigorous scientific inquiry are core values for MIT. Taken as a whole, MIT's international activities play an important role in helping the Institute accomplish its mission of advancing the frontiers of knowledge in science, technology, and other areas of scholarship, bringing such knowledge to bear on solving the world's most challenging problems, and educating future leaders with the ability to work creatively, cooperatively, and wisely for the betterment of humankind.

All of MIT's global partnerships and collaborations must comply with all relevant federal and state laws and regulations. They must be led or co-led by MIT principal investigators, whose responsibilities include ensuring that the work meets MIT's standards of quality and excellence. There must be no external interference in the conduct of research. There must also be no sponsor-imposed restrictions on the publication of research results in the open literature or on any other communication by the investigators about the results of their work. Safety and security risks to participating MIT students, faculty, and staff must always be of the highest priority.

These conditions are inviolable for MIT. However, taken on their own they are generally insufficient to determine which international opportunities we should pursue and which ones we should forego. For example, certain opportunities may enable us to carry out work that is important to MIT researchers and that promises to yield significant societal benefits. Yet the partners and sponsors of these activities may simultaneously exhibit values in other domains that our Institute does not share, or they may conduct other activities whose methods or goals are actively opposed by members of the MIT community.

Deciding whether to pursue such opportunities typically requires complex assessments, grounded in MIT's values. General principles must be considered in light of specific and sometimes contradictory information about the sponsor, the project, and the external environment. Difficult judgments balancing the benefits, costs, and potential risks to MIT's

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<sup>4</sup>A *Global Strategy for MIT*, <http://web.mit.edu/globalstrategy/index.html>

reputation often need to be made. Whatever the conclusion, it is unlikely that all members of the MIT community will agree with it.

Regarding MIT's Saudi activities, I recommend the following course of action:

1. We should continue to welcome outstanding Saudi students and researchers, as well as appropriate Saudi visitors, to our campus.
2. I recommend against terminating any of our existing engagements with private Saudi donors and sponsors.
3. I also recommend against terminating our relationships with the Saudi government agency KACST, the state-owned enterprise Aramco, and SABIC, a public company majority-owned by the state. Although the assessment is less straightforward here, I do not find a compelling case for withdrawing from these relationships. It is true that those organizations are part of a government that has been implicated in the murder of journalist Khashoggi, that is pursuing repressive policies at home, and whose participation in the Yemeni civil war has been widely condemned. Some members of our community argue that MIT's continuing association with KACST, Aramco, and SABIC is an implicit endorsement of Saudi government actions that have generated widespread revulsion around the world. They believe that MIT has an obligation to speak out on these issues and that we should be joining in efforts to isolate the Saudi government. However, there has been no suggestion that any of these organizations had any role in the planning and execution of the operation that ended in Mr. Khashoggi's murder. It also seems unlikely that they have any control over any of the other Saudi government actions mentioned above. Nor does it seem likely that termination of MIT's engagement with these entities would have any meaningful ameliorative effect on those actions. On the positive side, these organizations are supporting important research and activities at MIT on terms that honor our principles and comply with our policies. They are also providing critical resources to support the education of outstanding Saudi students and women scientists and engineers, who will surely be in the vanguard of social change in that country. Moreover, most of this work can be expected to deliver benefits of one form or another to Saudi society or to the physical environment in the Kingdom. I judge that the balance of actual and potential impacts, positive and negative, weighs in favor of a continuation of these relationships.

There will certainly be members of the MIT community who disagree with this conclusion.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, if any of the principal investigators who are leading these projects conclude that they do not wish to continue to do so in light of recent events,

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in a thoughtful and impassioned letter to *The Tech* (see <https://thetech.com/2018/10/25/reif-cut-ties-saudi-arabia>), a group of graduate students in the Department of Political Science have already argued against this view. Conversely, in interviews conducted as part of this assessment other members of our community have argued, with equal conviction and passion, for continued engagement with the Saudi people through the research and educational programs that MIT is pursuing with Saudi government sponsorship.

the Institute should work with them to minimize the resulting disruption to the research and to affected personnel, including most importantly our students. Our faculty will make their own determinations as to the best path forward. As long as these faculty members continue to be willing to lead these projects, I do not recommend withdrawal from MIT's current relationships with our Saudi sponsors and donors.

4. From time to time MIT undertakes large overseas engagements that require the physical presence of significant numbers of MIT people in those countries for substantial periods of time. We have no such engagements in Saudi Arabia today, and I recommend that we refrain from any such engagements in the future, at least until conditions on the ground have changed significantly. For any international engagement of this type, a necessary condition is that activities that are carried out under the Institute's auspices should be guided by the same core values that inform life and work on the MIT campus.<sup>6</sup> For example, on our campus we work hard to ensure honesty and integrity in all academic and personal dealings, fairness in the treatment of all individuals and groups, an open, respectful approach to discourse, and reliance on objective, fact-based inquiry. Obviously we cannot require other societies to conform to our values, and we should be respectful of social and cultural differences. But when MIT has a significant presence overseas we must be confident that these values will be upheld at least within the frame of our own operations there. In Saudi Arabia—where cultural norms, laws, and policies are biased against women, against certain religious groups, and against groups based on sexual orientation and gender identity—we ought not to proceed with major engagements unless we can be confident that members of those groups will experience no such bias within the frame of MIT's own activities. That is not the case today.
5. If opportunities arise in the future to enter into new Institute-scale research or educational relationships with private Saudi donors or sponsors that are primarily conducted at MIT, we should consider them as long as the activities comply with MIT's policies and principles and relevant laws and regulations, and as long as faculty are willing to lead them. We should also be willing to consider new Institute-scale research and educational relationships with Saudi government entities like KACST and Aramco under these same conditions, as long as MIT's senior leadership, in consultation with the faculty leader and with appropriate internal and external advice, concludes after careful deliberation that the balance of actual and potential impacts, positive and negative, weighs demonstrably in favor of the relationship.

-- Richard K. Lester

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<sup>6</sup> *A Global Strategy for MIT*, <http://web.mit.edu/globalstrategy/index.html>.

**Table 1: Current MIT activities enabled by Saudi collaborations and financial support**

Type of activity	Sources of support	Share of total expenditures (FY16-18)
1. SPONSORED RESEARCH PROGRAMS	Aramco SABIC KACST (King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology) KAUST (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology) KFUPM (King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals) Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University	52%
2. GIFT-ENABLED ACTIVITIES  Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) Jameel Water and Food Systems Lab (J-WAFS) Jameel World Education Lab (J-WEL) Jameel Clinic for Machine Learning in Health (J-Clinic) Ibn Khaldun Fellowship Program for Saudi Women Student scholarships and fellowships	Community Jameel Community Jameel Community Jameel Community Jameel KACST Various	44%
3. OTHER PROGRAMS  Industrial Liaison Program memberships Executive and professional education programs	Aramco, SABIC, Olayan Financing Group Various	4%