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Saudis buy a campus presence;
Georgetown shares in largesse to fund Islamic studies programs

By Julia Duin, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Two years ago this month, a Saudi prince caused a media splash - and raised eyebrows - when he donated \$20 million each to Georgetown and Harvard universities to fund Islamic studies.

Although few details have been released about how the money has been spent, at Georgetown, the money helped pay for a recent symposium on Islamic-Western relations held in the university's Copley Formal Lounge. The event attracted about 120 persons: students, Catholic priests, men in business suits and several women in colorful head scarves who all came to hear religion experts from several American universities, as well as from Bosnia, Ireland and Malaysia.

A member of the Norwegian royal family said he flew in just for the event.

"I just came here to learn the language scholars are using about these things," Prince Haakon of Norway said.

Some call the Saudi gift Arab generosity and gratitude for the years American universities have educated the elite of the Arab world. Others say the sheer size of the donations amounts to buying influence and creating bastions of noncritical pro-Islamic scholarship within academia.

"There's a possibility these campuses aren't getting gifts, they're getting investments," said Clifford May, president of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. "Departments on Middle Eastern studies tend to be dominated by professors tuned to the concerns of Arab and Muslim rulers. It's very difficult for scholars who don't follow this line to get jobs and tenure on college campuses.

"The relationship between these departments and the money that pours in is hard to establish, but like campaign finance reform, sometimes money is a bribe. Sometimes it's a tip."

The \$40 million gift from the Saudi donor, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, was the latest in a tradition that started in the 1970s - Muslim donors pumping millions of dollars into American universities to fund Islamic studies, hire faculty specialists in Islam and fund books and seminars on the world's second-largest religion.

Friends in the right places

This summer, Harvard appointed its Islamic history professor, Roy Mottahedeh, to head its Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Islamic Studies Program. Harvard is hiring the first of four endowed chairs in the program and is using some of the \$20 million to preserve a collection of Islamic documents.

On Nov. 3, the university hosted its first Islamic studies conference - named after Prince Alwaleed - on "Interpreting the Islamic Tradition in the Contemporary World."

Harvard would not provide additional details about the disbursement of the funds, nor would Mr. Mottahedeh respond to numerous requests for an interview.

At Georgetown, the money was funneled toward its Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, which was quickly renamed the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. The center, part of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, trains many of America's diplomats.

The Alwaleed Center is tucked away in a small suite of offices in the Bunn Intercultural Center. Its reception area is decorated with blue and white Pakistani tile, a framed page from the Koran and mother-of-pearl depictions of a menorah, the Nativity and the Dome of the Rock. The center's aim, according to its mission statement, is to "improve relations between the Muslim world and the West and enhance understanding of Muslims in the West."

The center's director, John Esposito, a prolific writer and praised by many as being a national authority on the religion, was severely criticized by several scholars for downplaying the threat of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s when he was a foreign affairs analyst for the State Department.

Mr. Esposito, "more than any other academic, contributed to American complacency prior to 9/11," Martin Kramer, a fellow at the Olin Institute at Harvard, wrote in a Jan. 2, 2006, commentary on his blog, sandbox.blog-city.com.

"[He has] proved that he's still a magnet for Arab and Muslim money," Mr. Kramer wrote. "Prince Alwaleed apparently decided that while Esposito's reputation may be dented, the professor still has some value in him."

Mr. Esposito declined to be interviewed for this article but did defend himself in several e-mails.

"Two of my books, including 'Unholy War,' were among the eight books recommended by [U.S. Army] Lt. Gen. John Vines to his senior staff when he took over command in Iraq," he wrote. "[My article] 'What Makes a Muslim Radical' in Foreign Policy received the most hits of any of its publications, more than 100,000 in the year it was published."

Mr. Esposito said the number of programs sponsored by his center went from 27 last year to 22 this semester alone. The first of three new faculty, Ibrahim Kalin, a scholar on Sufiism and Islamic philosophy, is slated to come on board next fall.

A month before the gift was publicly announced, Mr. Esposito was one of four persons flanking Prince Alwaleed before a photographer at the George V hotel in Paris. It was then that the prince told Georgetown officials of their \$20 million windfall - and that Mr. Esposito would oversee how the money was spent.

Spreading the wealth

Winfield Meyers, director of Campus Watch, a watchdog group under the aegis of the Middle East Forum think tank, said it's too early to tell whether the prince is getting his money's worth. One sign of success is if a university can place its recent doctoral graduates in positions of influence.

"The prince knew very well Georgetown's in a milieu filled with lobbyists and

opinion makers; thus any program of his will exert more influence there than at a university not in a power center like Washington," Mr. Meyers said. "The grant also gave Esposito a much bigger microphone. When you've got a \$20 million institute, that amplifies your voice considerably."

The Saudi Embassy's press office did not respond to requests for comment on this article, and a spokeswoman for Prince Alwaleed said he was "too busy" to respond.

According to one Saudi press organization, the grants are meant to promote understanding and change America's perceptions of Islam in the most fertile place, the university campus.

"The tendency, in some quarters, to identify Islam with fanaticism or even terrorism persists and has not been completely erased from the popular mind in the West," observed a commentator in a March 1, 2002, article in *Ain al-Yaqeen*, a weekly controlled by the Saudi royal family.

To that end, it continued, the late Saudi King Fahd paid for a "number of academic chairs in some of the most respected universities in the developed world."

The practice started around 1976, when the Saudi government established a King Faisal Chair in Islamic Studies for \$1 million at the University of Southern California.

In 1979, Saudi *Aramco World* magazine published a list of recent Middle Eastern gifts, including \$200,000 from the Saudis to Duke University for a program in Islamic and Arabian development studies; \$750,000 from the Libyan government for a chair of Arab culture at Georgetown University; and \$250,000 from the United Arab Emirates for a visiting professorship of Arab history, also at Georgetown.

In 1986, Saudi arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi donated \$5 million toward a sports center to be named after him at American University. Since then, grants for endowed chairs in Islamic studies and Middle Eastern studies centers have popped up at the University of California/Santa Barbara; Columbia University; Rice University; University of Arkansas; University of California in Los Angeles; and the University of California/Berkeley, among many others.

"Arab studies at Berkeley were totally revitalized by this money," said Emily Gottreich, vice chairman for UC/Berkeley's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. "We redefined what Arab studies is."

In 1998, the Sultan bin Abdulaziz al Saud Foundation announced a \$5 million gift to fund visiting professors and scholars, research and outreach funds and new quarters for Berkeley's Arab and Islamic Studies Center.

"Our post-docs have gone on to important tenure-track academic jobs," Ms. Gottreich said, listing 11 institutions, including Oxford, DePaul, Fordham and Harvard universities. "There's a market out there for PhDs with expertise in the Middle East."

Occasionally, universities have been embarrassed by offers and declined such gifts. In July 2000, the Harvard Divinity School accepted \$2.5 million from the ruler of the United Arab Emirates, Sheik Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, to endow an academic chair in Islamic Religious Studies. However, Rachel Fish, a divinity student, began a protest, accusing the sheik of funding an anti-Semitic think tank in his capital, Abu Dhabi.

Harvard officials said they would reconsider accepting the gift. In 2004, the sheik withdrew the funds.

Funding points of view

The idea of giving endowed chairs to advance a point of view is not exclusive to wealthy Arabs.

Claremont University recently announced a new chair in Mormon studies, funded by \$1 million in donations mostly from Mormons. In June, Brandeis University announced a \$15 million gift from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation for Israeli studies to counter what university president Jehuda Reinharz called an "astounding ignorance" of Israeli affairs, even among American Jews.

The Israel on Campus Coalition, a group of Jewish organizations, released a study earlier this year saying out of about 4,000 American institutions of higher learning, only nine have Israel studies centers, nine have Israel studies chairs, and 16 have visiting professors teaching about Israel.

There are 17 federally funded centers on American college campuses devoted solely to Middle Eastern studies centers and another 30 to 40 that do not receive federal aid, according to Amy Newhall, executive director of the Middle East Studies Association at the University of Arizona. Not counting several positions at Georgetown University, she estimated at least 10 chaired professorships currently funded by Saudis at major universities.

"With all the talk of the Israel lobby, no one talks about the Saudi lobby," Mr. Meyers said. "There is no counterweight to Saudi influence in American higher education."

Indeed, Ain-al-Yaqeen reported that King Fahd has spent "billions of Saudi riyals," around the world.

"In terms of Islamic institutions, the result is some 210 Islamic centers wholly or partly financed by Saudi Arabia, more than 1,500 mosques and 202 colleges and almost 2,000 schools for educating Muslim children in non-Islamic countries in Europe, North and South America, Australia and Asia," the paper reported.

The billionaire prince

Mr. Kramer, also the author of "Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America," says American universities have allowed themselves to be purveyors of Saudi influence and opinion.

"Universities generate ideas, and [Prince Alwaleed] regards one idea - the 'clash of civilizations' - as positively dangerous to Arabs and Muslims," he wrote on his Web site, martinkramer.org. "So he has embarked on a grand giving spree, to create academic 'bridges' between Islam and the West, and specifically between the Arab world and the United States ...

"The mind boggles at the possibilities, when you think of the purchasing power of the world's fifth-richest man," Mr Kramer continued. "Of course, this is why we can't ever expect to get the straight story on Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism and oil from people who operate within Middle Eastern studies. If you want a fabulously wealthy Saudi royal to drop out of the sky in his private jet and leave a few million, you had better watch what you say - which means you had better say nothing."

Prince Alwaleed, 52, - who slipped from the fifth richest person in 2005 to the 13th

this year, according to Forbes magazine - is best known to some Americans as the man who offered \$10 million to the victims of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. That money was rejected by Rudolph W. Giuliani, then the mayor, after the prince scolded the U.S. for favoring Israelis over Palestinians.

Prince Alwaleed found more welcoming recipients in academia.

In 2002, he donated \$500,000 to the George Herbert Walker Bush Scholarship Fund, established by the Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. In 2006, he donated \$10 million to the Weill Medical College of Cornell University.

He defends such gifts in interviews, saying that he has financed study programs about American culture overseas, including a \$10 million gift to found a Center for American Studies at American University in Cairo and \$5.2 million for a similar center at American University in Beirut.

Prince Alwaleed's Cairo and Beirut projects explain American culture, but according to their Web sites, offer no courses in Christianity - America's majority religion. Meanwhile, typical courses at the Georgetown center are "Islamic Theological Development" and "Islamic Religious Thought and Practice."

Zuhdi Jasser, a Phoenix physician and a Muslim who is chairman of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, says Islamic governments are looking for a free pass.

"Islamists such as the radical fundamentalists seen with the Saudi Wahhabis exploit American universal tolerance to provide a vehicle for the dissemination of their propaganda free of critique," he said in an e-mail. "It is important to emphasize - 'free of critique' ... it is the tolerance which permits that

"But I would hope that we correct our response not by changing our tolerance but by intensely critiquing political Islam and its incompatibility with our pluralistic democracy. America's laboratory of freedom and liberty should not change."

DEFENDING HIS RECORD: John Esposito, professor at Georgetown University, was criticized by scholars for downplaying the threat of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s when he was a foreign affairs analyst for the State Department. [Photo by Rodney Lamkey Jr./The Washington Times] Christina DePaul, dean of the Corcoran College of Art and Design, moved to the music at the second annual event benefiting the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. [Photo by James R. Brantley/The Washington Times] A sign above student lockers in the main hallway at the Marshall Academy boasts quite an accomplishment: 100 percent college acceptance. Marshall has been ahead of other open-enrollment District high schools in reading and math scores. Senior Rayvone Brown, 17, is applying to seven colleges and plans to major in computer science. [2 Photos by James R. Brantley/The Washington Times] Nick Costakis (left), who has worked at Hotel Washington for nearly 52 years, saw his share of interesting guests. Abel Anane (right), a 16-year employee, called the hotel's closure "heartbreaking." [Photo by Allison Shelley/The Washington Times] Sen. Barack Obama hosted the South Carolina rally with his wife, Michelle (center), and Oprah Winfrey. Attended by almost 30,000 people, it was heralded as the biggest rally of the 2008 primary cycle, and the Illinois Democrat's spokesman said 68 percent of those who booked tickets online were new campaign contacts. [Photo by Astrid Riecken/The Washington Times] The Swat Valley was known as the "Switzerland of Pakistan" until it was overrun this year by Islamists who imposed Shariah law. [Photo by Katie Falkenberg/The Washington Times] Dalia Mogahed (right) and Ingrid Mattson (left) attended the symposium on the state of Islamic-Western

relations held in October in the Copley Formal Lounge at Georgetown University. The Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown was named after the Saudi prince who donated \$20 million each to Georgetown and Harvard. The center trains many of America's diplomats. [Photo by Rodney Lamkey Jr./The Washington Times] Charlotte Ferguson, home from the University of Denver, and Alexander Whitridge were among the "junior" contingent at the event, which is intentionally trending younger. [Photo by James R. Brantley/The Washington Times] Christol Flowers, 17, a senior at the Marshall Academy, is applying to five colleges this year. She hopes to become a social worker, saying enthusiastically, "I love to give advice, and I love to hear it." [Photo by Bert V. Goulait/The Washington Times]; Rashida Ross, a 17-year-old senior at Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter School, fills out a college application form. Local organizations are hoping to increase the number of students in the District who finish high school in five years and earn a college degree in five years. [Photo by Bert V. Goulait/The Washington Times] The \$40 million gift from Saudi Arabian prince Alwaleed bin Talal was the latest in a tradition of Muslims giving to American universities to fund Islamic studies, hire faculty specialists in Islam and fund books on the world's second-largest religion. [Photo by Agence France-Presse/Getty Images]

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