



The Academy and the Middle East

On 15 October 2009, The Royal Academy of Engineering held a meeting for Fellows and invited guests to discuss the Academy's potential role in relation to the Middle East. The Academy has not had prior relations with the Middle East in a policy capacity and the meeting brought to light a number of useful ideas about the region and how the Academy could best make use of its standing and expertise.

Stuart Laing, Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and former Ambassador to Kuwait, opened the proceedings with an overview of the region which drew on his vast diplomatic experience. A number of presentations followed by Academy Fellows on various topics that are relevant to the Middle East: energy, water, security, infrastructure and education. Below are some observations made at the meeting that could be useful to be aware of when considering any future activity:

- Engineering is considered to be a prestigious subject to study but a significant number of graduates choose not to practice engineering as their occupation.
- Foreign nationals make up a large proportion of GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries. In Kuwait, there are twice as many foreign nationals as there are Kuwaiti citizens and 93% of Dubai's population is foreign. There is also a growing young population in the Middle East. Education of 'home-grown' talent and provision of suitable employment opportunities for this talent is therefore a priority.
- The UK and the Middle East have had strong trade links with approximately £2.5 billion worth of exports per annum to the UAE alone. Energy, education, tourism and defence are key sectors. Imports from China and India are growing rapidly. Good security is essential to safeguard trade.
- Energy is and will continue to be a key sector in the region. However, power shortages are forecast particularly in Dubai, Kuwait and parts of Saudi Arabia. Various countries in the Middle East are developing nuclear power programmes with heavy involvement from the US and France.
- The Middle East and North Africa region has 5% of the world's population but less than 1% of the freshwater. The availability of water is forecast to drop further with pollution adding to the problem of scarcity.
- The global financial downturn has had an impact on the region although it has not in general been as hard as other parts of the world. Infrastructure has especially been affected leaving half completed development projects, a drop in speculative investment and redundancies.
- The gradual awakening of the private sector, strengthening of civil society and changing role of women in some countries have contributed to what may become major changes.
- As well as good trade, the UK maintains stable relations with the GCC countries and English is widely spoken language especially in relation to education. These factors give the Academy and any UK partners a good, established platform to build upon.