



National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations

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23rd Arab-U.S. Policymakers Conference

*Framing and Charting the Region's Issues, Interests, Challenges, and Opportunities:
Implications for Arab and U.S. Policies*

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Speaker:

HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal – Chairman, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; former Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United Kingdom and to the United States of America; former Director General, General Intelligence Directorate, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Remarks as delivered.

[Dr. John Duke Anthony] Now we are going to switch to his Royal Highness Prince Turki al-Faisal who's been a fixture for a number of these conferences – not every one of them, but for quite a few in succession and alternating there. He takes time out from his teaching commitments at Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies where he's been a formative source on the advisory committee and the board there.

It's the first and for a long time the only center for contemporary Arab studies in the entire North American continent as such, and it speaks to the politics of academe that there was for so long but one and not others. Michael Hudson who's here has been a long-standing director of it. David Long was once a director of it as well.

Abi-Mershed now is the current director of it. So the students there are extraordinarily fortunate to have Prince Turki of all people to come and be your teacher. I imagine any university would give a lot for that.

He comes to this post from having been Ambassador to the United States, Ambassador to the Court of St. James in Great Britain, and for a quarter of a century prior to that as the Director General of the Country's External Intelligence Directorate. Prince Turki.

[Prince Turki Al Faisal] [Arabic phrase] Mr. Bosch and Dr. Anthony, thank you for inviting me once more to attend this uniquely remarkable conference that has become the most attended collection of people who are interested in promoting Arab-U.S. relations.

I congratulate the winners of the Distinguished Global Leadership Awards, Minister Attiyah and Dr. Habtoor. Not only do they deserve the awards, but they also represent luminous examples of Arabian Gulf public service and humanitarian contributions that do us proud.

I take this opportunity also to congratulate the fellows of the Findley Fellowship. You are doing excellent work, and I look forward to listening to your areas sometime in the near future, inshallah.

Ladies and gentlemen, Saudi Arabia is celebrating its 84th birthday. [Applause] Since 1932 when the union between the Sultanate of Nejd and its dependencies joined the Kingdom of the Hejaz to become the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, many so-called experts and pundits predicted its imminent downfall, and as you can see their prophetic capabilities have proved to be short of the mark. Thank God.

As we are witnessing, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Jordan joined the United States in striking terrorist targets in Syria. The Kingdom has been calling for cooperation against these terrorists since they first appeared in Syria three years ago.

Then, they were few, and the predominant resistance group opposing the murderous regime of Bashar al Assad were the nationalist, moderate, and inclusive opposition composed of all of the various components of Syrian society. I remind you of what I stated to American audiences since September 2011. In Syria a society now sits on the brink of an abyss of nightmarish internecine warfare, which could spill into Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq.

I went on to say finally when it comes difficulties facing our region one must still admit that terrorism remains an important threat, but it is not just al Qaeda that continues to plot against us. There are also various emerging and reemerging non-state actors who are moving in to take advantage of power vacuums created by shifting political dynamics, with governments in Libya, Yemen, Tunis, Egypt, and Syria in such tenuous conditions, the perfect conditions for terrorist cells to take root and conduct desperate, evil, and anarchical acts are created.

In October of the same year, 2011, in addressing this gathering I said, "In Syria we see a situation where the bloodshed still continues, and in spite of the efforts whether by individual leaders like King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, or the Arab League, or the international community - nonetheless the government of Syria seems to be bent on continuing its merciless and bloody attack on its people."

In November of that year, addressing the World Affairs Council here in Washington I said, "The Middle East has entered a phase of profound transition, with governments crumbling, new social forces emerging, partnerships realigning, and international tensions - some quite old, some fairly recent - mounting and requiring reassessments from all policy angles."

In April 2013, at Harvard's Kennedy School I said, "We will continue to do all we can by ourselves and through the Arab League and the United Nations to bring stability to Syria by acting on our principles - peace, cooperation, and progress. Along with diplomacy there must be a level playing field between the combatants on the ground.

Bashar's military superiority is what is prolonging the conflict. Supplying the defensive weapons needed by the Syrian people to defend themselves is what will bring the political settlement. By now we all know who are the good guys from the bad guys, and supplying them with the weaponry will raise their

prestige and give them credence with their people. Dilly-dallying is what allowed Jabhat al Nusra and other extremists to enter the fray, not the will or wish of the Syrian people.”

In October of 2013, at this conference again I said, “If the world, and especially the American people believe that removing Assad’s chemical weapons will end his slaughter of innocent children, women, and men in Syria, then all semblance of rational thought, humanitarian care, and national self-interest are thrown to the wind.

Preventing Assad from using his killing machine by any means, including targeted airstrikes at his air force and command and control centers is the only way that a politically negotiated end to the carnage in Syria can be achieved.

If you delay that now and you will have to do more when the carnage spreads to Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I am not touting my prophetic capabilities. I am merely reflecting on what could have been. Had America and Europe listened to the Kingdom and provided the moderate opposition with anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and anti-artillery weapons, we would not have had to deploy our air forces to face the challenge of Fa’esh – that’s my slang for Da’esh. Those of you who know Arabic will know that Fa’esh means the worst of the worst. And your President calls it ISIL – I’ll accept that.

These terrorists filled the void because of this neglect of the genuine opposition. And while Assad continued to bomb and gas his people the moderate opposition had to fight on two fronts – Assad on one front, and Fa’esh and its fellow terrorists on the other.

This is not the time to say we told you so. It is the time to go forward and build on the present military action with a political program to pacify and diffuse the many hot spots in the Middle East. Destroying Fa’esh is welcome, but it is the symptom, not the disease. We have to cure the disease or other Fa’eshs will rise again and again, and the suffering will continue. We can’t just hit Fa’esh and not look at Iraq and help the Iraqi people reach stability. The two situations in Iraq and Syria are connected, because Fa’esh operates in both. Another similarity was that in Iraq the former Prime Minister Malaki, who had enjoyed the support, ironically,²² of both the United States and Iran, marginalized and oppressed the Sunni minority, driving them to lend support to Fa’esh when it appeared on their doorsteps.

In Syria, Bashar al Assad has been brutalizing the Sunni majority along with the rest of his people for years. Iran and Russia are his main supporters. In Iraq, the removal of Malaki is helping in stopping the Sunnis from giving support to the terrorists, and in forming an inclusive government that will face the challenges in Iraq. I propose that likewise in Syria, ladies and gentlemen, by removing Assad the Syrian people will be able to form a unity government that will face the terrorists.

The Syrian Coalition Council, which is recognized by the United States and the Arab League and major European countries as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people has declared that it wants to form a national reconciliation government that will include the present regime, but without those who have bloodied their hands with the people's blood. That is the only way that stability will come to Syria. While supplying the moderate and inclusive opposition with defensive weapons will neutralize Assad's arms superiority.

Ladies and gentlemen, a no-fly zone on the borders of Syria with Jordan and with Turkey should be declared, and the Coalition Council should be helped in setting up their government on Syrian soil. This will truly legitimize the Council and allow it to treat directly with the Syrian people whom it represents.

In Egypt, President Sisi having been elected by the people under a constitution that guarantees political plurality and guarantees protection of religious minorities is working hard to fix Egypt's much abused economy by taking the difficult decisions that affect the lives of all Egyptians like the removal of government subsidies. Because the people recognize the necessity of such a move his popularity rating has not been affected. And the Kingdom stood and will continue to stand with the people of Egypt and provide whatever support we can. The U.S. and Europe should be equally supportive. But Egypt is equally plagued by an offshoot of Fa'esh in the Sinai Peninsula, and here the connection with Syria and Iraq is clearly visible.

In Yemen, bordering Saudi Arabia, the interim government is in the middle of a struggle with a Shia militia, which is very much modeled on Hezbollah in Lebanon, and has already occupied the capital, Sana'a, and other Yemeni cities. And Iran is its backer.

Working with the United Nations and the U.S., the Gulf Cooperation Council led by Saudi Arabia has helped Yemen to form the now beleaguered interim government. We continue to support it. And yet both the United States and Europe are paying scant attention to the situation there. Al Qaeda, the mother of Fa'esh, is terrorizing the Yemeni people, and some splinter groups have left the mother and declared their allegiance to Fa'esh.

In Bahrain, the Kingdom continues to support the efforts of the government to achieve a political reconciliation with the opposition based on the recommendations of the independent commission, which investigated the clashes that took place in 2011. The Crown Prince of Bahrain made extensive proposals to move the negotiations forward. Alas, the opposition is boycotting the elections and refuses to negotiate, except on its terms. This will further alienate them, not only from their fellow Bahrainis who are voting, but also from the growing number of Shias in Bahrain that want to return to normalcy and stability.

The Shia who oppose the tiny extremist minority that is dictating their terms are growing in number, and will eventually come out in revolt against the extremists. The opposition in Bahrain is also supported by Iran. Bahrain has been free of Fa'esh and Fa'esh-like groups, but terrorists from the Shia community continue to inflict harm and bloodshed.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will have noticed that I mentioned Iran in several instances. That is because it is intervening in the internal affairs of Syria by sending the Lebanese Hezbollah along with several Iraqi Shiite militias into Syria to support Assad in killing his people. Even now, Iran has publically opposed the actions taken against Fa'esh in Syria as an infringement on Syria's sovereignty. And yet Iran itself has been infringing on the Syrian people's lives by deploying its revolutionary guard in battle formations to help Assad kill his people.

In Iraq, we saw how Iran continued to cling to and support Malaki, even as he continued to undermine the effectiveness of the Iraq Army by appointing loyal Shia commanders in place of the American-trained and better qualified officer corps. The result was the shameful flight of these Malaki commanders when Fa'esh attacked Mosul.

Now, even as the new Iraqi government is cooperating with the U.S. to drive Fa'esh from Iraq, Iran's supreme leader opposes the American support for the government.

And I have already mentioned Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen, which support is undermining the stability and unity of Yemen, as is also their support for the Wefaq party in Bahrain.

In Palestine, Iran's support not only for Hamas but for the more extreme elements has been the main spoiler of the successive ceasefires agreed to by Hamas and Israel. The need to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is plain to

see for any reasonable party in the dispute, except for these Iranian-supported groups on the Palestinian side and the Israeli government and the settler movement in Israel.

The fact that all of the extremist terrorist groups operating in these countries use the plight of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation to justify their terrorist activity should convince even the die-hard supporters of Mr. Netanyahu that as long as Israel oppresses the Palestinian people and denies them their right to see to a nation and an identity we will continue to see the rise of terrorist groups, even as we work to destroy Fa'esh.

We will also see Iran interfering in Arab affairs and posing as supporters of the Palestinian people against the unjust and brutal Israeli occupation of Palestine.

As the nuclear negotiations continue between the P5+1 and Iran, we will wait to see on what terms they will end. But I can assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that should an agreement be reached we will be the first to applaud. However, we will also seek to have the same terms in developing our nuclear energy industry.

Last month, our Foreign Minister met with the Iranian Foreign Minister in New York. What we heard of these talks is that both sides laid a list of issues that they felt should be rectified between each side and the other. I hope that effort will succeed.

Two things bind us to Iran, ladies and gentlemen: geography and Islam. And it is a pity that the nearness of the geography and the sharing of this wonderful religion has not yet been capable of bringing Iran to extend the hand of friendship to the Arab world, and as Iran sees it vice versa. So our hope for peace between Iran and the Arab world and cooperation is alive and it is driven by those two factors, the geography and Islam.

But also as a union of world countries and people we have to counter the nihilist ideology that the terrorist groups advocate by challenging their ideology and exposing them as subverters of Islam, not Muslims.

The Saudi leadership has continually and frequently condemned them, and our religious authorities have been on the front lines of issuing fatwas declaring them as apostates and criminals. Our school curricula have been cleansed of any possible misinterpretations that could lead to extremist views, and our media outlets, even in cyber space, challenge the misuse and abuse of that new medium by these groups.

This new coalition, which is now bombing Fa'esh, is the way to combat all extremism, but airstrikes are not enough. The ideology must be challenged. The finances must be interdicted. And the cynical supporters of governments that murder their people must be stopped. And for once and for all I say to those who accuse Saudi Arabia or Saudi wealthy sheiks of supporting ISIS, ISIL, or Fa'esh, or any other terrorist group to either put up or shut up.

Since September 11th, the Kingdom has worked closely with the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and other countries to identify the miscreants. Those who have been identified have been prosecuted and convicted.

So you can't point your fingers and not come through with what you know. Tell us and we take action. And if there is anyone in this hall or in any other location with names, come forward and deliver what you have. But do not wag your fingers at us.

Until today, ladies and gentlemen, the International Counterterrorism Center at the United Nations, which the Kingdom first proposed back in 2005 and has been financing with millions of dollars, has done nothing to fulfill its goals. It should be sharing intelligence from the whole world on terrorists and their whereabouts. It should be sharing know-how and expertise with countries that lack both. It should be financing countries that don't have financial resources to beef up their counterterrorism methods. On all these counts it fails the test. All of the countries with the wherewithal to contribute to these aims are sitting back and ignoring it. If we had that center operating since 2005, Fa'esh and similar groups would not have been created.

On that somber note, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for listening to me.

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