

# Saudi-American Forum

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## **THE AMERICAN-SAUDI ARABIAN RELATIONSHIP: A BRIEFING BY HRH PRINCE SA'UD AL FAISAL, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

By John Duke Anthony

### **Introduction**

The National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations recently led a delegation of American defense representatives, strategists, energy and geo-political specialists to Saudi Arabia. Meetings were held with some of the most prominent defense and diplomatic personnel in the Kingdom, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Education, oil company heads, representatives of the Majlis Ash-Shura [Consultative Council], American and Saudi corporate CEOs, 18 Saudi Arabian women leaders, and newly elected officials of the country 19 chambers of commerce and industry, among others.

A highlight of the visit was a meeting with and briefing by HRH Prince Sa'ud Al Faisal Al Sa'ud, the kingdom's long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs. The topics covered spanned the historical foundations of the special Saudi Arabian-United States relationship, developments in the Kingdom in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the people-to-people and private sector relationships between the two countries, and analytical and policy issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war on terrorism, and Iraq.

*GulfWire* is pleased to provide the following report on the briefing by its publisher, Dr. Anthony.

Patrick W. Ryan  
Editor-in-Chief, *GulfWire*

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#### **Remarks by HRH Prince Sa'ud Al Faisal Al Sa'ud, Saudi Arabian Minister of Foreign Affairs**

"It is surprising that the relationship between us has lasted for so long despite inadequate information about each other. Maybe it's because we have taken each other for granted.

"The present juncture is one where the relationships are being tested, where perceptions are being formed, hopefully based on reality.

"In spite of the governments, the credit for strengthening the relationship between us has been our respective business communities."

### **Through History's Lens**

"President Roosevelt played a key role, of course, but the relationship became strong really through the oil companies – their approach and the relations between us, and on the trust of the employees in the companies.

"Perhaps the nature of the two countries had something in common. But the foundation of the relationship was based on trust and respect, a foundation that was built between two very different cultures.

"This was brought home to me recently during a visit to meet with President Bush in Texas this past spring. One elderly American lady whose family had lived and worked in Saudi Arabia for three generations and who herself, as a child, was raised in the Aramco community, came up to our Crown Prince and hugged him and wouldn't let go. "This wouldn't have happened without the human side of the relationship. We have to return to the human dimensions of our relationship. Our relationship has gone through periods of tension and crisis. What happened on 9-11 and since then is not the first time we have experienced tension and crisis."

### **Changing Perceptions**

"During my time in the United States, the view was that Nasser was the wave of the future, that Saudi Arabia would not survive the threat that he represented, because we were seen as an anachronism whose death was prematurely announced many times. Needless to say, I don't agree with that assessment.

"Our country is going through a time of transformation – politically, socially, and economically. There's never been such a dialogue as we have now within the government, among people in so many sectors, and among the people as a whole.

"We have a saying in Arabic about everything. One is that, 'You may hate something, but something good may come of it. In God's wisdom, even when there's a disaster that's horrible and tragic, some good could come out of it.'

"For both of us, 9-11 must lead to two things. First is introspection – what might we have done to avert this from happening? Second, there has to be a conviction and commitment from both of us not to let this happen again."

### **Trauma**

"It's been traumatic for us. When we found that so many Saudi Arabians were involved, our reaction was, first, incomprehension, then denial that it could have happened, and then the awful reaction that this is true. It was as though one wakes up one day and finds that one's son is a mass murderer.

"Never again will we allow our sons to go to such places like Afghanistan in their teens and be affected by something such as Al-Qaeda that stole their reasoning. That's one aspect. Another aspect is where reflection on both sides is needed, because terrorism is a disease that exists on causes that steal people's sense of reality and impairs their judgment.

"In the Middle East the roots of these causes have long been prevalent. Generations of Arabs have seen things go from bad to worse.

"In the beginning, the image of the United States was practically pristine. This lasted through the time of Eisenhower. Up until then, there was no defense cooperation between the United States and Israel."

### **Ike, JFK, and LBJ**

"Eisenhower forced the Israelis out of Egypt and compelled the British and French to withdraw from the Suez Canal. From the time of Woodrow Wilson, the American image was clean and pure. The United States had no colonial or imperial ambitions and it was remembered for Wilson's famous "Fourteen Points," one of which emphasized the importance of 'self-determination.' Those ideas reflected America in the Arab world.

"From then on, America's image increasingly reflected the voices of Arab nationalism. In turn, American depictions of Arabs changed to focus on the ideas represented by Nasser, with his bellicose rhetoric, with the statements of some nationalists about 'pushing the Israelis into the sea.'

"Many Americans during that time saw Arabs as hostile. It soon followed that many Americans believed the United States had only one great partner in the Middle East, one that stood in marked contrast to the image that Nasser came to represent.

"I'm going through this history to demonstrate that it was not always smooth sailing between us and that people of goodwill had to work hard to put and keep the relationship on a good foundation.

"During the time of Kennedy, the relationship became antagonistic at first. But with the visit by King Faisal to Washington, first to meet with President Kennedy, and then with President Johnson, it became smoother."

### **Opening Up**

"Now it needs to be fixed again. We know we must be more open. This is not easy for us, especially for those who not so long ago were Bedouins. Many of our Bedouins were not unlike the image of what cowboys in the United States used to be – self-reliant men who didn't talk about themselves. In an age of mass media, of course, this has become an anachronism. We have to talk to you, to your mass media, to your government advisers, to your Congress.

"And we have to make it possible for your school children to visit here. That kind of exchange is

essential. But other elements are also essential. My hope is that the negative atmosphere in some parts of the United States will not affect some of the good things between us.

"It would be a tragedy if our students were not able to go to school in the United States. The percentage of our youth going to your schools has dropped because of the measures you have taken.

"I am concerned about the wisdom of these decisions, because the degree to which they will have a positive impact on security is not readily apparent. However, with regard to our mutual security concerns overall, there has never been greater cooperation between us."

### **"Breeders" and "Incubators?"**

"Another challenge we have is how to explain ourselves. Are we 'a breeder of terrorism'? 'An incubator of fanaticism'? Are our religious clerics forcing us in this direction?

"Taking into consideration that Saudi Arabia is the center of the Islamic world, it is true that we remain practitioners of Islamic law. It is also true that other countries that are Islamic are not as constrained in their capacity to enact non-Islamic laws. But because of who, what, and where we are, we have no choice but to administer the shari'ah [Islamic law] and to interpret the law.

"In this regard, Saudi Arabia has had a long experience in struggling with extremist opinions. When the Kingdom first opened itself to the outside world, a man who wore trousers – [early in the last century] the British officer, Captain Shakespeare -- was shot; he stood out in marked contrast to those in Arab dress, despite the fact that he was fighting on the side of King Abdalaziz.

"Those who have studied our history know that [when the Kingdom was being built] there were long periods when King Abdalaziz remained outside Riyadh, as the tribes there were fighting with religious fervor. He did not return to Riyadh until he was certain that he would be able to defeat the forces of extremism.

"It is also well-known that conservative religious leaders opposed his introduction of the radio and the telegraph because, in their view, they were 'instruments of the devil and carriers of evil.' The situation he faced was not unlike that of the American Indians, some of whom saw the locomotive as 'an iron horse.' And, of course, there were many who opposed the introduction of foreigners into our country.

"It was not until after King Abdalaziz was able to defeat the extremists that he opened the country to the Western world. The blessings of oil followed. Despite the opposition of religious extremists, he welcomed the companies that found and produced the oil.

"The extremists did not disappear all at once. What we're seeing is that more and more in the United States appear to be similar in the sense that they interpret literally scripture that is much older than ours. In your country, one finds religious leaders and others saying some outrageous things.

"But does such extremism among some of our citizens determine Saudi Arabia? And do similar acts by individual Americans determine the United States?"

"It is true that one can find speakers in some of our mosques saying outrageous things. But the vast majority of speakers in our mosques talk about the virtues of peace. It seems that few Americans hear or know about such speakers."

### **Teaching and Preaching**

"We have begun to re-evaluate what is said in our mosques. We are also reviewing how we train our preachers and teachers. What we have found is not as bad as we thought.

"I'm chairman of the King Faisal Foundation, which is engaged extensively in the field of education inside the Kingdom. We administer a primary and a secondary school. Immediately after we began the review of our educational system, we had teachers read every book in the curriculum with a view to improving not so much the subject matter of the books but the messages in them. "We require that students read about other religions. To our surprise, we found that 85% of the materials being used called for understanding people of other faiths, ten percent called for interpretation by the teacher, and five percent of what was in the curriculum was horrible. From this, we have concluded that the five per cent that is horrible cannot be, in and of itself, a 'breeder of terrorism.' But even with regard to the five percent, our teachers are working hard to remove it.

"Regarding the fifteen per cent that needs to be improved, we have been holding meetings with the teachers at the schools to provide them courses on what happened on 9-11. We have made a course on terrorism as one of the requirements.

"This is one aspect of how we were affected by what happened and what we have done on this issue. We have sent what we have done to the Minister of Education, whose ministry is going to implement what we have done throughout the country.

"In any country, there will always be people who talk negatively. But we have gotten our religious leaders to meet in a synod where they are reflecting on what messages they are communicating domestically and externally to the Islamic community of believers worldwide.

"The messages cannot be for militants or extremists. They have to be middle-of-the-road. The messages have to be ones that all can follow. We hope that these leaders will not spend their time discussing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin but, hopefully, more substantive matters.

"I mention this because it contrasts so sharply with the image many Americans have of us as beset with problems that we haven't any hope of solving, as burdened with issues we can't change, and as governed by extremist 'Wahhabis'."

### **Increasing Participation**

"Along with these kinds of challenges, we have other ones related to the need for change, as for

example in our infrastructure, in a citizens' bill of rights, and in the nature and extent of people's participation in the national development and policy-making processes. In the past decade, we have been able to make substantial progress in all these areas.

"But even your own Founding Fathers, who spoke and wrote at length about equality and liberal values, did not provide for universal suffrage in the beginning. Only those who owned property were allowed to vote and have a stake in your government. It took time to increase the number of rights and, with them, responsibilities.

"Here our basic rights – a person's human and constitutional rights -- are taught and emphasized in our schools. In this regard, we have established a National Human Rights Commission, overseen by the king, to ensure that there is no abuse of anyone's human rights by any government agency."

### **Social Cohesion**

"One thing we won't do is, by premature reforms, break the social bonds among the Kingdom's people. Were we to do that, we'd be going back to tribalism and fighting among each other. No reforms will be promoted by the top without due regard to their potential impact on social cohesion.

"Likewise, the administration of Islamic law will continue to be the binding force within the Kingdom. If one breaks the existing system of rules, one be broken.

"We'll also continue implementing political reforms with a view to widening the extent of political participation."

### **Discussion**

**Q.** "How do you see the United States at this time?"

**A.** "The perception that Saudi Arabians have of the United States is different than that which they have of any other country. We feel a sense of responsibility for Americans in this region. It makes some jealous, but we do it to ensure as best we can that the United States doesn't make mistakes in the region. Maybe this is presumptuous on our part, but it reflects our long experience in and with your country.

"Regarding our perceptions about your changing the government in Iraq or here, our objection is based on our view that we don't think that such an approach works.

"If you want inspectors in Iraq, I don't see how you can do it if you bomb the country, occupy it, and change the government. I'm no soldier myself, but no matter how smart your weapons are, how can you ensure that you'll kill only the bad guys and not the good Iraqis? I have never read or seen in history how a government installed by a foreign military force survives after the withdrawal of the foreign troops.

"You may of course be able to defeat Iraq, but I'd hate to be in the place of the general who the

next day will have to rule over the Shammar and the Anayzah tribes, the Kurds, the Shia, the Sunnis, and the many other groups in Iraq. Since as far back as 2,000 years ago, figuring out how to govern the people of Iraq has not been easy.

"Our concern is about the day after you change the government of Iraq – how do you govern it? What's the objective? Here's where we have our own view about these matters.

"We have been living for the past two years beside Palestinian devastation, and this time, for the first time, without any inhibiting actions by the United States. U.S. policy inhibitions with regard to the use of American weapons against civilians seem to have no application, despite the fact that the Israeli Defense Force is using tanks and helicopters against the Palestinians.

"This has been brewing all this period. It won't help if the United States does nothing to stop the carnage, yet at the same time goes to war against Iraq. The U.S. intelligence services do not say that Iraq has an atomic weapon.

"I make a distinction between two positions. One of the cardinal balances that we have worked assiduously to come to terms with in the Arab world – that is, the balance with the United States – has been broken.

"That balance goes like this. It's true that America has a special relationship with Israel, that it provides Israel with all the weapons that it needs, that it will ensure Israel's security.

"Since the time of Nixon, we have been assured by the United States that it will use its relationship with Israel to work towards securing peace in the Middle East. This is the equation that would work for the region as a whole, and for Israel and the Arab countries in particular, because they want peace.

"But if the relationship is used by the United States to make the Likud Party a pax-Israeliana, there is no way that can be viewed as other than hostile to us. We are still positive in our belief that the United States the United Nations Security Council, the Arab Peace Plan, and the speech to the Israeli occupation. If this logic were to break down, if this attitude is no longer operative, then the United States will be in conflict with the Arab world.

"This is what makes us work so hard -- for example, in helping the Palestinians devise a more effective constitution that provides for democratic rights and institutions. I realize that this, to some, seems funny in the extreme. But in the meetings of the Quartet [a grouping of the United States, Russia, the United Nations, and the European Union] I was the only one arguing to let them elect their leaders. I know this may seem to some to be a reversal of what people expect or are accustomed to, but politics are full of strange things, reversals included."

**Q.** "If there is a war with Iraq, what does Saudi Arabia see itself doing in the event Saddam departs from the scene?"

**A.** "Soldiers can come and do their work and withdraw from the region to which they are deployed. We cannot withdraw from where we are.

"If there's a military attack by the United States, I don't see how it can bring stability to Iraq. Right now, you already have the chief of staff of Turkey saying that, if there is instability, Turkey will not forget its claim on Kirkuk. Iranian leaders have said much the same thing about how they feel about Iraq's Shia' population and Iraq's religious shrines.

"There is a responsibility towards the status quo with regard to borders. We have seen what has happened in Africa in this regard, but this is not Africa. Here it would be much more devastating than anything that Africa has experienced in that regard.

"And what will happen to the world's economy – it's very fragile now. People have lost confidence in capitalist institutions and, in Asia, in Japan especially.

"Iraq, in revenge, may hit Kuwait and even Saudi Arabia. Even if Saudi Arabia were to raise its production 2-3 million barrels a day, if Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil were both removed from the market, what we could do in an attempt to replace it would not be enough. One thing for sure is that Russia could not meet the shortfall in supplies.

"I don't know if these issues are being discussed in the United States when people discuss whatever they discuss about this war. Some of your newspaper reporters put the fear of God in us because they concentrate on Special Forces and the use of command and control.

"I don't know if all the things people say are possible are in fact possible. I'm sure that not all of the U.S. generals are in support of all these plans that we read about. I wish the generals' concerns would be taken into consideration.

"We're aware that after the United States defeated Saddam Hussein the last time, American troops refused to go into Baghdad, with some saying the United States either was not brave enough to do so and others saying that Bush's father did not want to see his troops have to enter a city of that size because it would likely have resulted in the loss of many American lives.

"I realize that instead of having to use 800 planes this time, you could probably use 80 or fewer planes and 'smart bombs' that are smarter than before. But the question remains the same – what do you do the next day? How do you administer a new regime? What do you do?

"I hope the people who fought the last war have given their opinions. We are afraid of the results of what you might do. If you get the British to go in with you, they will eventually withdraw, and we'll have to remain with the consequences."

*[American comment] "Some groups in both our countries find certain things said in the other country offensive, and these offensive remarks, even when they touch on only one or two issues, unfortunately tend to frame a substantial portion of what passes for debate.*

*"In Saudi Arabia, we have seen that only one issue is central to all the perceptions about the United States that is negative, and that's the Palestinian question. There's nothing else.*

*"On our side, there are two other issues of concern. One is al-Qaeda and how it got 15 of the 19 terrorists who were Saudi Arabians to do this thing to us. The other issue is Sharon, who wants to return to 'fortress Israel' of the 1950s and 1960s, claiming that Israel is the representative of western values in the face of hostile Arabs.*

*"Yet we have seen that Saudi Arabia is much more complicated than the picture painted by many in the United States, and that there's a greater variety of issues than the ones mentioned here. But there must be a greater element of goodwill in the debate than we're seeing in order for both of us to be better able to analyze the issues of concern to us.*

*"There are groups in the United States that are intentionally misrepresenting the truth, and are doing it based on the interests of those groups. This kind of thing cannot be faced alone.*

*"If Saudi Arabia is important to the United States, these groups must be faced up to, as they reflect only their own interests and not the interests of the United States, let alone the interests of the rest of the world."*

**Q.** "Were you quoted correctly by the media, which suggested that you had indicated Saudi Arabia was willing to reconsider its position regarding the use of its bases in the event of an attack against Iraq?"

**A.** "We have a saying that when you say the obvious, it appears that you are saying something strange. All I said, and have been saying, was that I was against the United States acting independently of the United Nations.

"In response to what my media inquisitor asked regarding, 'If the United States decides to use force...', I said that if the decision is based on a UN Security Council resolution under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, then all UN members have no recourse but to abide by that decision. If any country does not, that country would be placed under sanctions by the United Nations.

"The United Nations cannot force a country to use its bases, but with regard to the usage of a member country's airspace under a UN Chapter Seven resolution, that country cannot refuse to comply unless it is willing to be put under UN sanctions as a result."

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## **ABOUT THE SAUDI-AMERICAN FORUM**

The Saudi-American Forum is an information service designed to provide you timely information -- background and current issues - - impacting the Saudi-U.S. relationship.

The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act



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in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

The Saudi-American Forum is a FREE service provided to the public by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. The Forum consists of a web site and an email information service. Visit the web site at: <http://www.saudi-american-forum.org>

#### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

You can contribute your ideas and feedback to the Forum through use of the "Feedback" form on the website or through direct email to the Forum at: [info@SaudiAmericanForum.net](mailto:info@SaudiAmericanForum.net)

*Thank you for your support of the Saudi-U.S. relationship and the  
Saudi-American Forum.*