

*The United States  
and Saudi Arabia:  
A Relationship Threatened  
By Misconceptions*

Address by  
Minister of Foreign Affairs  
HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal  
to the  
Council on Foreign Relations

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## **Distinguished members, ladies and gentlemen:**

**T**hirty years ago, in the fall of 1974, I had the privilege of addressing this forum for the first time. Many things have changed since then ... for one thing this audience seems much younger and regrettably I am much older. However, one thing has not changed, and that is the very important role this Council plays in forging and formulating informed opinion about issues of strategic importance for the United States.

Saudi Arabia and the United States have enjoyed a well known “special relationship” which, over a period of 70 years had developed and blossomed into a strategic alliance that benefited both countries. Recently this relationship has come under extreme strain. A critical juncture has been reached, and unless joint efforts are brought to bear to redress and rectify the underlying causes, the damage may be grave.

It does not take great insight to conclude that the horrendous and terrorist act of 9/11 changed the factors influencing this relationship.

A great deal of effort has been expended in analyzing the fatal event; ranging from the cogent and perceptive, to the ridiculous and absurd. The ensuing onslaught on Saudi Arabia has been intense and at times purposefully malicious.

I shall concentrate on the major allegations, for there have been many, which are at the core of these attacks.

I hope with your patience, and indeed with your collaboration, we can “sit down and reason together”, as one American president had said, and sift fact from fiction in order to stop the drift towards alienation and suspicion, and return to the mutual understanding and trust that defined our traditionally healthy relationship.

Prior to 9/11, Saudi Arabia was the target of some criticism in the United States and elsewhere. But to what we have faced since 9/11, these criticisms seem tame by comparison. Since then, the attacks became—to my mind—irresponsibly vicious. Some of the flavor of these attacks can be gleaned from the titles of books recently published as works of scholarship, such as:

*“It is the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia that in fact is proving to be the body most qualified to delegitimize Al-Qaeda's claims, the very religious community that is being attacked and discredited.”*

*“The ideology espoused by Al-Qaeda can be summarized in its belief in the negation of the legitimacy of all the governments of the Islamic countries, and especially Saudi Arabia, for the purpose of re-establishing the Islamic Caliphate with Al-Qaeda as its vanguard. The latest version of this plan calls for the destruction of the Saudi state, and from that point on, achieve the union of the Islamic world with bin Laden presumably at the helm and the Al-Qaeda forming the nucleus of his power. To achieve that objective, they had first to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the United States, and what better tool to utilize than the spectacular criminal act of 9/11 with the major instrument for that act being the 15 Saudis.”*

- “Sleeping With the Devil: How Washington Sold Its Soul for Saudi Crude”
- “Inside The Opaque Kingdom.” I don’t know what is opaque about Saudi Arabia, which is probably the sunniest place on earth.
- “Forbidden Truth: U.S.-Taliban Secret Oil Diplomacy, Saudi Arabia and the Failed Search for bin Laden.”
- “101 Reasons NOT To Murder The Entire Saudi Royal Family.” Although I am gratified for that, I wish that it had been 1,001, to keep it within the Arab tradition.
- “Hatred’s Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism”
- Perhaps most absurd of all: “House of Bush, House of Saud: The Secret Relationship Between the World’s Two Most Powerful Dynasties”

Instant so-called experts sprang from nowhere and everywhere, most of whom have never even visited Saudi Arabia, claiming a gift of analysis denied to mere mortals. By using such words as jihad, Wahhabism, madrassa, they endow them with emotively negative contents that surpass the realm of objectivity and defy any sense of reality.

Many of the attacks are too absurd to respond to, so with your indulgence I shall restrict my comments to the four following themes:

- Fifteen of the nineteen attackers came from Saudi Arabia.
- Saudi Arabia’s internal social and political makeup results in nurturing extremism, radicalism and breeding zealots and terrorists.
- Saudi Arabia is not doing enough to introduce fiscal regulations to control the flow of funds to terrorist organizations.
- Saudi Arabia is not cooperating with the United States and the international community in the war on terrorism.

These are at the core of the attacks for what may be termed “Saudi bashing.”

To respond to the two first allegations, one must look into the phenomenon of Al-Qaeda and its figurehead, [Osama] bin Laden. Though a Saudi by birth, he developed his ideology and methodology in Afghanistan, under the tutelage of a radicalized cult of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization I assume every one here

knows. He was not taught his doctrines and creed in Saudi schools, or madrassas, or mosques.

If Saudi Arabia is guilty of blame for what he has become, the United States must surely share the blame. Both of us backed the mujahedeen to liberate Afghanistan from Soviet occupation and allowed such people as Bin Laden into the fray.

We all remember the days when the word mujahedeen was used in the media of the time to signify the paradigm of the true freedom fighter, when those same mujahedeen were honored, praised, and even received in the White House. No less a super hero than Rambo himself adopted their cause and fought with them side by side.

The ideology that bin Laden follows was ingrained in him by this radicalized cult of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is not the teaching of the Wahhabi reform movement or any other school indigenous to Saudi Arabia that were the cause of his metamorphosis.

The ideology espoused by Al-Qaeda can be summarized in its belief in the negation of the legitimacy of all the governments of the Islamic countries, and especially Saudi Arabia, for the purpose of re-establishing the Islamic Caliphate with Al-Qaeda as its vanguard. The latest version of this plan calls for the destruction of the Saudi state, and from that point on, achieve the union of the Islamic world with bin Laden presumably at the helm and the Al-Qaeda forming the nucleus of his power.

To achieve that objective, they had first to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the United States, and what better tool to utilize than the spectacular criminal act of 9/11 with the major instrument for that act being the 15 Saudis.

Saudi Arabia in fact has its own brand of extremists and zealots, and even some hate-mongers. It is not unique in this; many other countries have their own brand of extremists and hate-mongers. The Saudi state, since the time of King Abdul Aziz, has been at constant conflict with them.

This indigenous form of ultra-conservatism was and still is isolationist in nature. Their major concern is to keep Saudi Arabia outside the movement toward modernity, which they perceive as a threat to the moral purity of Islamic society.

*“Even the extremist religious elements within the country that are against modernity completely reject Al-Qaeda’s ideology and methodology.”*

Their preaching is not the global expansionist ideology of Al-Qaeda, but rather an insular isolationist anti modernity ideology.

If we merge the isolationism of the Amish of Pennsylvania and the beliefs of the puritans of the early Commonwealth of Massachusetts, we can perhaps get a flavor of the ideology of these arch conservatives.

This is a crucial distinction that must be made. Because the insular extremism of Saudi Arabia's arch conservatives is being used as evidence for not only the sympathy, but also the collaboration of Saudi Arabia and its society with Al-Qaeda's aims and objectives.

Nothing is further from the truth, as evidenced by the war being waged relentlessly against Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, and the support that the society is giving the government's efforts to rid the country of these evildoers.

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Seen in this perspective, it is not hard to understand the reasons why bin Laden and his cohorts chose Saudis to perpetrate their heinous act in the United States. What is not understood is why the detractors of Saudi Arabia keep hammering on the fact that 15 of the perpetrators were Saudis, as if that fact alone makes a nation of 16 million liable and accountable for the act.

It is ironic to note here that those who most vociferously attack Saudi Arabia are unwittingly serving the purposes of Al-Qaeda and the ideology it represents.

More ominously, their attacks, if anything, will undermine the country that is waging total war against them, and that is probably the country most capable of preventing them from spreading their cultist ideology in the Islamic world. It is the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia that in fact is proving to be the body most qualified to delegitimize Al-Qaeda's claims, the very religious community that is being attacked and discredited.

As a further adjunct to the damage that these attacks are inflicting, they provide cogent proof to the conservative elements of Saudi Arabia to entrench their opposition against reform. They see and interpret these attacks, not as the erroneous and misguided reactions

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to the tragedy of 9/11, but as a purposeful intent to undermine the social fabrics of Saudi society.

The media, the instant experts, and even some respected think tanks and political figures have done a great deal of damage to my country in the eyes of the American public. These attacks presumably are aimed to force a reluctant Saudi Arabian government towards reforms. They are accomplishing exactly the opposite and making the government's task of reform much more difficult.

Lest anyone misconstrue, let me affirm here, with as strong a conviction as I can make, that the leadership in Saudi Arabia remain steadfast in their effort to push their program for reform. For us reform is an absolute requisite for the advancement of the country and its people regardless where the opposition is coming from or from where the external pressure is being applied.

Reforms must emanate from within, the purpose of which is to insure the welfare of the people by providing good governance and equality in the eyes of the law for all citizens. It is not a mere slogan or a field for risky experimentation. It is an ongoing process where adaptability and continuity are essential.

Unlike the mainstream thinking in the West that views Islam, indeed all religion, as the antithesis to progress, for us in Saudi Arabia, Islam which provides its adherents with a sense of community has to play a central role as the binding force that will maintain the unity of the nation and the harmony of its society during this otherwise turbulent period.

The other allegation that Saudi Arabia is not doing enough to stem funding to terrorist organizations is simply not true. The new fiscal regulations in force in Saudi Arabia at this time are the most stringent in the world. This was attested to by various United States officials and international organizations. A report by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental body including the members of the G-8, recently concluded that Saudi Arabia now has in place world-class laws and regulations to combat terror financing. According to one official involved in the assessment, the new regulations Saudi Arabia has put in place for Saudi-based charities "probably go further than any country in the world."

Those who make the claim that Saudi Arabia is not cooperating in the war against terrorism are surely grossly misinformed. Saudi

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Arabia itself is a target for the terrorists, as the events of last week amply show.

Joint commissions have been formed between various Saudi Arabian and United States agencies to exchange intelligence and actively participate in this continuing war. In a testimony before the House International Relations Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia last month, it was stated that: "The Saudis are a strong ally and are taking unprecedented steps to address an Al-Qaeda menace that threatens us both." (Ambassador J. Cofer Black of the Department of State). Other members of the administration have warmly praised Saudi cooperation as well.

The most frustrating aspect to us Saudis is that even though these facts by now are well-known, some of the media and some of the opinion-makers simply ignore them as if Saudi Arabia serves a persistent need for an Orwellian target to be constantly assailed. As one example, when we approached a leading politician in this country on why he keeps attacking Saudi Arabia on these points of terrorism and the money trail after providing him with all the facts concerning the issues, his answer was "don't pay any attention to what we say these days. This is the silly season, the season of election." I wonder if the esteemed gentleman thought of the impact of his remarks on attitudes towards democracy.

Sooner or later both of us will have to abandon recriminations and concentrate on what can be done to retrieve the healthy relationship between our two countries.

Saudi Arabians know the United States well. We know America well because tens of thousands of Saudis studied here. Hundreds of thousands of Saudis come here to visit, and the interchange in the business community is quite vigorous. On the other hand, the people of the United States know very little about Saudi Arabia, except that it is that far away place, where men wear skirts, and there is plenty of oil. Perhaps we must take the blame for this lack of knowledge and we are trying to correct that.

- The country has opened its doors to the world media and they can come and observe for themselves what is going on. The relations of our two countries are too important to allow them to be determined by misconceptions.
- On the part of the United States I shall hazard to suggest that it should make a review of the stringent requirements for travel to

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the United States from Saudi Arabia and the Arab world, especially for students. This is a very important element in cementing the foundations of the relationship, because these students carry back with them not only the skills they learned, but also the knowledge of the people and the values they represent; these are two essential elements that should be nurtured.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is pervasive to all issues in the Middle East. No, this is not a non-sequitor. Although opinion-makers in the United States hold to the premise that the relations between the United States and the Arab world can not be based on one issue alone, the other side of the coin is no less true; you could not come to grips with these relations between the United States and the Arab world without tackling the problem of this conflict with some semblance of justice and fairness.

If American audiences can see what millions of Arabs see nightly on their television screens, they may come to understand the overwhelming emotional impact this has on the ordinary man and woman in the Middle East.

We in the Arab world have come to fully understand that the United States is committed to the security of Israel. But security has become a catch-word for the Israelis to avoid the hard decisions needed to make peace. Israel is demanding now to be assured of absolute security before committing to peace. But to quote a distinguished American statesman and thinker, that if, and here I quote : “Only absolute security—the neutralization of the opponent—is considered a sufficient guarantee, then the desire of one power for absolute security means absolute insecurity for all the others.” The statesman is the Honorable Dr. Henry Kissinger.

Because we have adjusted to and accepted the existence of Israel in the Arab world, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Abdullah proposed a peace initiative, which was unanimously adopted by the Beirut Arab Summit. The initiative is a realistic peace plan that compliments the Quartet’s Road Map [peace plan]. The Arab initiative was refused outright. The road map, I believe, was refused by the Israeli government by over-qualifying the acceptance. We should recommit our efforts to the peace process particularly now when the civil societies on both sides of the divide are pressing their public opinion to accept a peaceful settlement. Such an opportunity should not be lost.

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The challenge for the United States is to come with the proverbial balanced policy towards the peace process.

The United States must insure that Israel's actions and policies do not jeopardize the establishment of a viable Palestinian state and the return of the Arab occupied lands. Peace is in the interest of the United States as well as in the interest of stability and security. Surely it is also in the interest of Israel and its citizens.

International cooperation is also needed in Iraq. I mention Iraq here so that the subject does not become conspicuous by omission. To do justice to the subject would need more time than is allowed for. I will be happy to answer any questions concerning this issue in the question and answer session.

But in order not to tax your patience further I would like to conclude by saying:

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It is certainly a viable hope to see an end to widespread misinformation between us, to respect each other's history and culture. It is surely appropriate for us to cooperate to bring peace to a region racked by turmoil. The benefits for both of us are enormous.

Saudi Arabia, Islam, and Muslims are not the enemy. Injustice and deprivation inflicted upon the Arab and Islamic world are the true breeding ground for terrorism. These are the real enemies.

In the struggle against these evils, we must be partners, who, sharing the same objectives, are still able to recognize and allow for diversity. We must not fight the wrong battle; our quarrel is not with each other. Let us join forces instead against the uncivilized, the criminal, and the unjust.

Let us resolve to commit ourselves to this fight, and together eradicate not only the scourge of terrorism, but the very conditions that breed it.

Thank you again for this opportunity and may God's peace be upon you.



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