

# Saudi-U.S. Relations

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## Information Service

Item of Interest

September 12, 2003

### **Saudi Officials Take on Challenges in the Media**

Prince Saud Al-Faisal and Prince Turki Al-Faisal Respond to Charges

**September 10, 2003**

#### **The Saudis Respond**

Defending Saudi Arabia against criticism, Riyadh's Foreign Minister warns of an "insurmountable gulf" in U.S.-Saudi relations

By SCOTT MACLEOD/PARIS

*Time*

On the eve of the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal is fuming over continuing U.S. criticism of Saudi Arabia for its part in the atrocity. While admitting the need for Saudi internal reform, he charges that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not the Saudi social system, is the "festering ground" for terrorism. He cautions that if misconceptions about Saudi Arabia persist, it may cause an unbridgeable gap in long-standing U.S.-Saudi relations. As for America's difficulties in Iraq, the prince says, "We told you so."

Excerpts:

**TIME:** Is all the criticism of Saudi Arabia harming U.S.-Saudi relations?

**SAUD:** The media certainly keeps at it. The Congress seems to be pre-occupied with everything that comes from Saudi Arabia, with the attitude that we are guilty until proven innocent. It is one of those never ending stories, until it finally reaches rock bottom. I hope by the time it reaches rock bottom, it hasn't done too much damage to the relationship.

**TIME:** Has it already damaged relations? You were upset when Congress recently issued its report on 9/11 apparently damning Saudi Arabia and then the Bush Administration withheld 28 pages of it.

**SAUD:** We are angry when we are accused without being given a chance to defend ourselves. When no matter what you do, it is considered a public relations gimmick rather than a real effort. That isn't the way that friends treat each other. If you are complaining about something I have done, and I do something about it, some appreciation is shown, amongst friends. Yet, whatever we do is just water under the bridge, and they go to another attack. It starts with the 15 people on

the planes that created this catastrophe. Then, the accusation was that the ulema [Saudi religious leaders] were talking and encouraging [extremism], the schools were creating terrorists.

**TIME:** So, what has Saudi Arabia done?

**SAUD:** Now, Saudi Arabia is against all terrorists. Whatever justification [for terrorism] Saudis understood before, now they see they are at war with these terrorists. It is not true that the extremists are gaining the upper hand. We are fighting terrorists, pursuing them everywhere, closing the net on them. The government has arrested many of the ulema. The war, as the Crown Prince said, is a war against those who wage it, who encourage it, who support it, and even those who tacitly accept it. If there are in the pulpits of the mosques those who urge violence, they are removed immediately. In the schools, the books have been changed for the new school year. The instructions to the teachers have been changed. The [terrorist] money aspect is now completely controlled and your government knows it. In spite of all the effort, you still hear talk that "the schools are bringing out terrorists, the ulema are bringing out terrorists".

**TIME:** There is no link between intolerance taught in Saudi schools and mosques and the production of home-grown extremists?

**SAUD:** There are some elements in the books that are necessary to remove and they have been removed. But that they were a breeding ground, a festering ground for terrorists, that is not the case. The festering ground for terrorists was Afghanistan and is the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. It is not the social makeup of Saudi Arabia. You can see this in the makeup of al-Qaeda. Maybe they have some foot soldiers who are Saudis. All the leadership of al-Qaeda except for bin Laden are not Saudis. Why have we seen in the 9/11 incident nobody but Saudis? It was done on purpose [to harm U.S.-Saudi relations]. Unfortunately, those in the U.S., in the media or in Congress, who continue to make that argument, are falling into the strategy of the terrorists.

**TIME:** Is the criticism indicative of a new U.S.-Saudi relationship?

**SAUD:** There is nothing wrong with "a new relationship". The previous relationship had the characteristic of comfort. You knew nothing about us, we knew nothing about you, I mean the citizens of both countries. This has changed. I hope that we come to know each other better. But this will not happen if we are using untruths and lies and misconceptions about each other. If these misconceptions continue to rise, they build a gulf that is insurmountable. We try to fight that gulf. We are finding a hard time on the other side of the ocean.

**TIME:** How do Saudis look at America today?

**SAUD:** One major element is the policies of the United States in the Middle East. In the media every day, we see what is happening in Palestine. Public opinion is made by that. [People] see the violence, they see the indignity that the Palestinians are facing.

**TIME:** Do you have any interest or desire to change the strategic relationship with the U.S.?

**SAUD:** Absolutely not. We have had mutual interests, substantial economic cooperation and

human-to-human contacts with the United States, which we believe both countries gain from. That's what we want to come back to.

**TIME:** Should we read anything into Crown Prince Abdullah's historic visit to Moscow in early September?

**SAUD:** We are almost neighbors. We believe both of us have an opportunity to gain in trade, commerce and investment between our two countries. It is not gamesmanship. If it does [have an effect on oil price policies], it would be a positive policy. One thing that nobody has complained about is Saudi policy on oil.

**TIME:** Are you threatened by ideas coming from American neo-conservatives aimed at bringing about democracy in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world?

**SAUD:** All the discussions that we had [with the U.S.] on Iraq were on concerns about what happens after the attack. It is not diplomatic to say "We told you so", but we told you so, that things won't work out. Keeping the security element in Iraq and running the government, the water, the electricity, would be the important elements. Iraq was ruled by perhaps 2 million military and paramilitary, and a million Baathists. You do away with that, and how do you run the country, with 50,000 or 250,000 troops? It is unmanageable.

**TIME:** But doesn't democracy threaten the Saudi system?

**SAUD:** Turning Iraq into a stable country, how can this be disadvantageous to Saudi Arabia? We were facing a country that was attacking us militarily. We would much rather be threatened by democratic ideas than with Scud missiles and weapons of mass destruction. [In Saudi Arabia], real reform is being done with the intention of keeping the social cohesion and unity of the country together. We are not playing experiments in labs. We believe we are going at it with the ear of our leaders to the heartbeat of the people, what they expect, what they need and how far they want to go.

**TIME:** Even reform-minded Saudis complain that there is a lot of talk, but less action.

**SAUD:** They will see, but talk has to lead action, not the other way around. We are not going to have, as happened [with the Shah] in Iran, a revolution from the top forcing the population into something that they don't want.

**TIME:** How serious is the threat of al-Qaeda to Saudi Arabia?

**SAUD:** We believe we can handle it. And we have done a pretty good job of it, but this is no time to remain complacent, but vigilant. I hope we solve the problem and remove this cancer from our country. Everyone is shocked.

**-end -**

**Source:** <http://www.saudiembassy.net>

September 10, 2003

**Saudi Ambassador to U.K. Prince Turki Al-Faisal Interviewed by Katie Couric, NBC Today**

**KATIE COURIC, NBC ANCHOR:** Fifteen of the 19 hijackers on September 11 were from Saudi Arabia, and now a new book alleges that many high-ranking officials in Saudi Arabia may have helped fund Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. One of those officials is Prince Turki Al-Faisal. He spent more than 20 years as head of Saudi intelligence and is currently Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Great Britain. Your Royal Highness, good morning.

**PRINCE TURKI AL-FAISAL, SAUDI AMBASSADOR TO GREAT BRITAIN:** Good morning, Katie. Nice to talk to you.

**COURIC:** Well, nice to have you. As I mentioned, this new book by Gerald Posner specifically names you as being the person who donated as much as \$2 billion to Osama bin Laden in hopes of keeping him in Afghanistan and out of Saudi Arabia. You've acknowledged meeting him a number of times, so is there any truth to these recent allegations?

**AL-FAISAL:** Absolutely no truth whatsoever. When I met bin Laden, it was before the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in the '80s. And the last time was 1990. So the assertion that I met with him in 1991 is totally false. And this fellow, Posner, he bases all these allegations on unnamed sources and it makes you wonder why they're unnamed.

**COURIC:** Prince Turki, could you have possibly been an unknowing go-between for someone higher up in the Saudi government?

**AL-FAISAL:** How can I be unknowing and a go-between at the same time, Ms. Couric? This is totally fabricated story and without any basis of fact at all. And, as I understand it, even some officials in the United States have denied the allegations made by this fellow Posner.

**COURIC:** In his book, he also describes the interrogation of a terrorist known as Abu Zubaydah, the number three man in Al Qaeda. Apparently U.S. officials rigged up a room to make it seem as if he was being interrogated in Saudi Arabia. They gave him sodium pentathol or truth serum. And according to the book, at that point Zubaydah relaxed, gave interrogators Saudi numbers to call and named three members of the royal family who would be able to help him out of his situation. And then, in a very strange twist, all of those people are now dead. They all died, some mysteriously, within months of each other. What do you make of this account?

**AL-FAISAL:** Well, this is what makes it so sad and so really reviling about the book. It takes three people like Prince Faisal bin Salman, well-known to the United States because he was the owner of one of the Kentucky Derby winners a couple of years ago, and two other princes, and all three had absolutely nothing to do either with politics or with bin Laden or with terrorism. And he maligns them by these aspersions in his book. And what he bases his information on is leaks from sources in the administration: one from the White House as he claims, and the other

one from the CIA. Why doesn't he name his sources so that people can question them? And this is what is so disgusting about the whole book is that it is based on unnamed sources and really a rehashing of stories that came about since September 11.

**COURIC:** Why, in your view, Prince Turki, do so many questions still persist about Saudi Arabia and its role in September 11 and its role in the fight against terrorism?

**AL-FAISAL:** Well, I have absolutely no idea, because what we have been doing before and since September 11 is to work very closely with the United States in combating terrorism, and more particularly in combating Osama bin Laden. When I was director of intelligence in the Kingdom in 1997, our defense minister proposed to your director of central intelligence - George Tenet, at the time - the setting up of a joint committee to pursue and follow all of the actions and information particularly about bin Laden. And that committee has been meeting since 1997 on almost a bimonthly basis, one time in the States, one time in the Kingdom. And ...

**COURIC:** If that's the case, Prince Turki, and you were head of Saudi Arabia's intelligence service for 24 years, did you have indication that these attacks were imminent? And if so, did you warn the United States in any way?

**AL-FAISAL:** If we had any indications that they were imminent, we would have shared them with the United States immediately because that committee was standing and working at that time. But both of us, the United States and Saudi Arabia, did not have that information.

**COURIC:** What do you make of the 28 pages that were redacted from the official report by Congress on September 11 having to do with Saudi Arabia? Do you know what those pages contained? And how do you feel about the fact that they were redacted?

**AL-FAISAL:** Well, our foreign minister went to meet with President Bush on this specific issue and asked him to release those papers, because we knew that by not releasing them it would leave room for people to speculate and to make accusations and to make innuendoes about Saudi Arabia and so on.

We have nothing to fear. If there are any facts that can be proved in those 28 or 29 pages about Saudi Arabia, let's thrash them out, bring them out into the open, and we can follow them up and investigate them and jointly take action against them. But to leave them sequestered like that, without anybody being able to see them, at least from our side, is leaving the situation in a very terrible state because we're accused without knowing what we're accused of.

**COURIC:** Prince Turki, thanks so much for talking with us today.

**-end -**

**Source:** <http://www.saudiembassy.net>

## **ABOUT THE SAUDI -US RELATIONS INFORMATION SERVICE**

The Saudi-U.S. Relations Information Service (SUSRIS) web site is part of a private sector, information service highlighting the characteristics, strength and importance of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

The SUSRIS is a public service of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations as an element of its mission: *To educate Americans about Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world through leadership development, people-to-people programs, lectures, publications, and grassroots outreach.*

The Forum consists of a web site and an email information service.  
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### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

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***Thank you for your support of the Saudi-U.S. relationship and the Saudi-US Relations Information Service.***