

Saudi-U.S. Relations

Information Service

Item of Interest

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Understanding US-Saudi Relations: Challenging Stereotypes

Amb. Chas Freeman at SAIS

Editor's Note:

On November 7, 2003, the "Understanding the Middle East Club," of the School of the Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University, hosted a forum on "U.S.-Saudi Relations" that featured panelists Thomas Lippman, former *Washington Post* reporter, Retired Major General Paul R. Schwartz, Chas. W. Freeman, former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and Les Janka, SAIS graduate and president and chair of the Council on American-Saudi Dialogue.

The following is a transcript of Amb. Freeman's remarks. Also see: Saudi-American Forum Interview Ambassador Chas W. Freeman -- A Relationship in Transition

LES JANKA: Our next speaker is Ambassador Chas Freeman. Chas is president of the Middle East Policy Council. Ambassador Freeman also served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for international security affairs and served, as General Schwartz has mentioned, as ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the *Desert Shield/Desert Storm* period. But, Ambassador Freeman is much more than a Middle East specialist. He's served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African affairs. He was Chief of Mission in our embassies in Bangkok and in Beijing. And, I first became aware of his many talents when I was on the National Security Council in 1972 when Chas served as the American interpreter for the late President Nixon's historic visit to Beijing. Chas, the podium is yours.

CHAS FREEMAN: Thank you. I'm going to try to be brief. Both because I wasn't really aware that we were to make opening remarks until I arrived; and also because, well I guess if I'm brief I'll be a bit superficial but that really doesn't bother me at all. In fact, I was once told by a wise man from the East that if something is worth doing, it's worth doing superficially. I am actually a little bit reluctant to speak to American audiences about Saudi Arabia because I find that in the audience there are people who can rehearse the details of the educational curriculum of Saudi Arabia and tell me what was allegedly said in which mosque on what date by imam so-and-so. And, there's an enormous body of knowledge out there obviously on the part of people, who've never been to Saudi Arabia, don't speak Arabic, never met a Saudi, but they know a lot because the conventional wisdom about Saudi Arabia is now ubiquitous.

Everybody knows all sorts of things about Saudi Arabia.

I can say honestly that I didn't know a damn thing about Saudi Arabia before I went there. In fact, my proudest achievement in 30 years of foreign service prior to that was not to have served in the Middle East. After all, why would you want to? It's the region that originally gave hypocrisy a bad name, and anyone who's been anywhere near it knows that in the summer, living in Riyadh is like living in a hairdryer. So, why would you want to go there? And so, like Paul, when I was in Mozambique, I received a call from the White House asking me if I would be enthusiastic about going to Riyadh. It took me about 15 seconds to develop the appropriate degree of enthusiasm for the task.

And, when I got there, I discovered something that I have discovered everywhere I've been – namely that virtually everything I thought I knew about the place was wrong or at least not accurate; and that Saudi Arabia was a very strange place indeed, quite different from what I had imagined. When I arrived there, Saudi Arabia was the fourth largest exporter of wheat in the world. And, I can explain how that happened if you want, but it's not part of the normal image. It was also, and I believe it remains, the largest importer of sand in the world. The Saudi sand being too fine to be used for cement. At that time, Saudi Arabia was importing sand from Sweden and other places. Anyway, enough said.

I think the point is that we need to be careful before we accept the stereotype, particularly those developed in a time of great emotion, and Saudi Arabia deserves a close look. I agree with Paul by the way, that there hasn't really been any fundamental change in the interests that bind the U.S. and Saudi Arabia together. Oil.. Saudi Arabia is the swing producer. It is the only producer who can bring down the prices when there is an interruption in supply, as it did when this happened in Venezuela. Saudi Arabia, which now has a production capacity of about 10 million barrels per day, will have to build that up to 20 million barrels per day within 10 years at the given rate of increased consumption here and in new markets like China.

Saudi Arabia is, as Paul said, the epicenter of Islam. It makes a big difference that the Ayatollah Khomeini never got to preach in Mecca or that Osama bin Laden is not standing there as the imam, reading the prayers. Moderate management of the holy places of Islam, Mecca and Medina, is very important to American interests.

Also, Saudi Arabia is a little place about the size of Western Europe that happens to sit exactly between Europe and Asia. You can't fly between Europe and Asia without flying over it, and you can't get there by ship unless you go around the Cape of Good Hope without going off the coast. When I was ambassador, even before *Desert Shield* occurred, I found that my defense attaché was clearing some 30,000 U.S. military flights a year through Saudi airspace. So, this is a strategically located territory, even if it didn't have oil and two of the holiest cities on earth.

And, finally of course, since 9/11, we've acquired a very direct, urgent interest in cooperation with the Saudis on the issue of terrorism. This is because the target of Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda is Saudi Arabia -- the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy. It would form a defiant, crusading Islam -- an Islam that would once again be aggressive and ostentatious in a way that it had not been since the eighth century A.D.

I don't think Osama bin Laden is going to succeed. His method has been to drive a wedge between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia; and thereby, seek to withdraw American support from Saudi Arabia and to end cooperation between the two of us. In terms of the vilification of Saudi Arabia's image in the United States, I have to give the man high marks. I'd give him an "A." And to say anything kind about Saudi Arabia is to invite a reprimand. To say anything unkind about it is to win points.

There are, underlying this -- because this is SAIS you are all thinking great thoughts about how the world is organized -- I think there is a set of suppositions that underlie some of the negative images of Saudi Arabia and of Islam at the moment that may need examination. For example, I hear it stated as a fact, an incontrovertible axiom, that religious education, especially Islamic education in madrassas to use the English plural, leads to violence. Religious education leads to violence. I know of no evidence for this theory at all.

I suppose one could look at the Catholic education of the members of the IRA, and show that Catholicism is inherently prone to blowing up department stores in London. Or, one could look at the behavior of Pat Robertson, who right up until the moment Charles Taylor was removed as president of Liberia, was funneling money to the man on religious grounds and conclude that Protestants are inherently prone to genocide. Or, one could of course talk about the Jewish militant who shot 53 people in a mosque in Hebron, that therefore the Jewish religion is inclined to mass murder. I think this is all really farfetched. The case might be made for Islam having a similar effect on people, but I don't think it has been made. I think this is one of those wonderful unexamined propositions that passes into the conventional wisdom and is overdue for examination.

Second, I think there is sort of the assumption that Osama bin Laden is sort of a scruffy guy with a beard, who looks good at the supermarket checkout. I don't know if you have ever seen the *Weekly World News* that periodically features pictures of Osama and his alleged gay lover Saddam Hussein, which is actually a kind of neat concept that only Americans can come up with. Osama bin Laden is exactly the sort of guy who graduates from a madrasa. But of course the man is an engineer. And one of the most wonderful things, in fact the only wonderful thing about the atrocity of 9/11, was that it allowed everybody to pick up their pet rock and attribute terrorism to that.

So, we're told that poverty breeds terrorism, although Osama comes from a family that is sort of the equivalent of the Rockefellers in Saudi Arabia and certainly didn't have a deprived childhood financially. And, most of the people who came here, the 15 Saudis who came and did 9/11 were from the privileged background. However, poverty causes terrorism. Environmental degradation causes terrorism. Sexism causes terrorism. Whatever your pet rock is, that causes terrorism. Arab culture breeds terrorism. But, in fact, all the evidence seems to me to suggest that the causes of the terrorism are a combination of humiliation and a search for revenge on the one hand along with the lack of alternative weapons -- people who have M-16s don't need to blow themselves up in order to strike targets. They can do it at less cost to themselves. So, grievance and desperation seem to me to be at the root of it.

We especially ought to ask ourselves a question or two about who is the enemy. I mean, to the extent that Iraq has not eclipsed the war on terrorism, which I think in Congress it has. And actually, Paul, I think part of the reason for the relative respite from Saudi bashing in the last couple of weeks is not that we understand Saudi Arabia better or that we've done any serious thinking about Saudi Arabia or the Middle East, it's just that we're now in such trouble in Iraq that that's absorbing this.

At any rate, perhaps it is too much to ask the American people, 70% of whom believe Saddam Hussein or the Iraqis did do 9/11 despite the absence of any evidence or connection at all, to engage in effective reflection on this. But, I think we do need to understand who the enemy is and who the enemy is not. And in this connection, the U.S. government clearly understands that Saudi Arabia is an ally in the war on terror. And, the Saudis understand that they need the United States equally to combat the threat of terrorism in the kingdom. The trouble is that both governments find themselves defending the relationship against increasingly hostile publics. All of the animosity that now exists in the United States towards Saudi Arabia is fully mirrored in Saudi Arabia in attitudes at the popular level toward the United States.

In any event, just to wind up, I think there's a lot of evidence that the Saudis have engaged in a fair amount of soul searching. Those who doubt this should probably read the speech of Crown Prince Abdullah at the Gulf Cooperation Council in December 2001, which is one of the most remarkable political documents of the age -- in terms of its recognition, its call to Arabs to stop blaming other people for their own mistakes and to look within themselves to struggle, to improve the situation. One could look at the Beirut initiative when he said Saudi Arabia would be the first to normalize relations with Israel in the event of an Israeli-Palestinian peace, not the last; Saudi Arabia would bring the Arab world with it -- in that the remarkable departure from past policy; or his proclamation of a reform charter for the Arab world.

Saudi Arabia has very serious problems with its fiscal crisis and the demographic challenge that are very difficult. But it does seem to be thinking about these things. Frankly, I would be happy if the United States were doing a little more intelligent thinking about the situation we have gotten ourselves into than we are. And, in this connection, I don't think things like soft rock and Lebanese pop music interspersed with the equivalent of the CBS news is really.. think if you listen to that for 100 hours, you might go nuts actually.

You know, you might have a more favorable view of U.S. policy, but if that happened to you, all you would have to do is turn on Fox News, which is widely available in the region. And, all of the good would be undone, which is to say that nasty things that an imam or two might say in a mosque are more than reciprocated by nasty things that people say on television here in the United States. Perhaps, we all ought to cool it. Thanks.

LES JANKA: Thank you Chas. It's really been a broad exposure to a lot of interesting things to think about in the kingdom. I would just like to add two other points in thinking about what we know or think we know about the kingdom or that we think might not be accurate or find not to be accurate.

There's two significant data points that always come to my mind as I think about the U.S.-Saudi

interaction and the challenges that the kingdom is facing. The first is that half of all the people in the population in Saudi Arabia are under the age of 20. Think of what that means in terms of social change -- pressures on education, pressures on housing, pressure on jobs -- a lot of things in the region that you'll have to worry about.

The other one, the notion that perhaps the Saudis don't really understand the United States, and they don't see us for what we are, and, it's amazing that they can't understand why Americans' answers and policies aren't better appreciated. I'm always reminded that in the Saudi government, in the Saudi Cabinet, there are more American-trained PhDs than there are in the American Cabinet and American Congress combined. So, it's not a question of a country that doesn't understand America. They know where we are coming from.

Audio Version: <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/>

Transcripts of presentations by General Schwartz and Mr. Lippman will be provided separately.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Ambassador Chas. W. Freeman, Jr. succeeded Senator George McGovern as President of the Middle East Policy Council on December 1, 1997.

Ambassador Freeman was Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs from 1993-94, earning the highest public service awards of the Department of Defense for his roles in designing a NATO-centered post-Cold War European security system and in reestablishing defense and military relations with China. He served as U. S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia (during operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm). He was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during the historic U.S. mediation of Namibian independence from South Africa and Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola.

Chas. Freeman served as Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d'Affaires in the American embassies at both Bangkok (1984-1986) and Beijing (1981-1984). He was Director for Chinese Affairs at the U.S. Department of State from 1979-1981. He was the principal American interpreter during the late President Nixon's path-breaking visit to China in 1972. In addition to his Middle Eastern, African, East Asian and European diplomatic experience, he served in India.

Ambassador Freeman earned a certificate in Latin American studies from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, certificates in both the national and Taiwan dialects of Chinese from the former Foreign Service Institute field school in Taiwan, a BA from Yale University and a JD from the Harvard Law School. He is the recipient of numerous high honors and awards. He was elected to the Academy of American Diplomacy in 1995. He is the author of *The Diplomat's Dictionary* (Revised Edition) and *Arts of Power*, both published by the United States Institute of Peace in 1997. Ambassador Freeman is Chairman of the Board of Projects International, Inc., a Washington-based business development firm that specializes in arranging international joint ventures, acquisitions, and other business operations for its American and foreign clients. He also serves as Co-Chair of the United States-China Policy Foundation and

Vice Chair of the Atlantic Council of the United States. He is a member of the boards of the Institute for Defense Analyses, the regional security centers of the U.S. Department of Defense, and the Washington World Affairs Council.

Previous Positions

1995 - Present Chairman of the Board, Projects International, Inc.
1994-95 Distinguished Fellow, United States Institute of Peace
1993-94 Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs
1992-93 Distinguished Fellow, Institute for National Strategic Studies
1989-92 U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
1986-89 Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, African Affairs

Recent Honors

1995 Elected to American Academy of Diplomacy
1994 Distinguished Public Service Award (Policy innovation in Europe)
1994 Distinguished Public Service Award (Contributions in Defense Policy)
1994 Order of 'Abd Al-'Azziz, 1st Class (Diplomatic Service)
1991 Defense Meritorious Service (Desert Shield/Storm)
1991 CIA Medallion (Desert Shield/Storm)
1991 Distinguished Honor Award (Desert Shield/Storm)

Recent Major Publications and Writings

Arts of Power: Statecraft and Diplomacy, U.S. Institute of Peace Press, Washington, D.C., 1997.
The Diplomat's Dictionary, Second Edition, revised, U.S. Institute of Peace Press, Washington, D.C. 1997

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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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