

Saudi-U.S. Relations

Information Service

SUSRIS Item of Interest

September 30, 2003

HRH Prince Saud Al-Faisal Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the U.S.-Arab Economic Forum

Editor's Note:

In an address to the US-Arab Economic Forum (Sep 28-30) in Detroit Prince Saud Al-Faisal discussed the U.S.-Saudi Arabian relationship -- its background, status and prospects -- and developments in the Middle East. We are pleased to be able to bring you his remarks.

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Mr. Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank the U.S.-Arab Economic Forum and Mayor Kwame M. Kilpatrick for holding this meeting in the great city of Detroit. Detroit not only produces the best cars, and arguably the best taboulah and hummous, yet it has also been hospitable to the Arab-American community.

Knowing how Arabs are proud of their language, I had intended to deliver my speech in Arabic, but after hearing the eloquent use of that language by participants in this Forum, especially our Arab-American friends, I decided, in all humility, to speak in English instead. Regardless of the language, it is indeed a pleasure for me to be here this morning.

We meet at an important gathering, and at a significant time to discuss an important subject: how best to achieve economic cooperation. I started my career in government --let's just say many years ago - as a junior economics researcher in the Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals. That is why the subject of this forum intrigues and fascinates me.

Economics, investment, commerce and trade are the pillars upon which relations among nations are founded.

To paraphrase an old saying: if war is an extension of diplomacy, in this age of globalization, diplomacy has become an extension of economics. If economic relations are healthy, fair and equitable between nations, they will lead to a harmonious accord. If not, discord and strife are the logical outcome.

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I would like to discuss with you today some of the issues facing our two nations. In spite of our governments trying to assume credit for the harmonious relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States, it was actually established by entrepreneurs, businessmen and investors.

In the 1930s, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was building the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, your business community and the Saudi people were building an 8,000-mile bridge between our two nations. American oil companies came to Arabia, discovered oil and established roots among us. Many other companies followed. They all found a welcoming environment.

Over the years, the relationship evolved and blossomed to assume a political, as well as a strategic dimension, and developed into a full-fledged alliance between two countries and people who shared similar values in spite of their different cultures and history.

Our bonds remain strong because American and Saudi values are, at their core, very similar.

Like the American people, Saudis are dedicated to preserving the qualities that uniquely define them: their faith and trust in God, their history, their culture, and their hope for a better future for their children and grandchildren.

Yesterday, I was in New York. I was again struck with pain by memories of that horrible day when so many innocent people perished.

The people of Saudi Arabia were horrified by the blatant disregard for human life and the evilness of the deed. We were appalled that human beings can inflict such pain on other human beings.

Contrary to the perceptions advanced by some in the media, well over 90% of the Saudi people reject Bin Laden and what he stands for. And these figures were the result of public opinion polls taken by American pollsters in Saudi Arabia.

The aim of the terrorists who committed these crimes was humanity at large. They hoped that their acts would incite conflict among faiths and civilizations and bring an end to order in the global system.

Bin Laden, who had nurtured a particular hatred for America and Saudi Arabia, arranged for a special twist that is demonic in its intent. It has been proven by the admissions of no other than Khaled Sheik Mohammed, al-Qaeda's chief of operations who is under detention by the United States, that Bin Laden personally chose mainly Saudis to carry out the missions of 9-11, even though Saudis are a minority in the ranks of al-Qaeda and in its leadership.

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His aim in doing so was obvious: It was to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

On that day, however, the whole world stood by America. People from all corners of the world joined hands to denounce that heinous act and support the resolve of the United States to bring the perpetrators to justice - whatever the cost - and to declare that terrorism has no religion or nationality; that it is pure evil, condemned and abhorred by all faiths and all cultures.

True Muslims, for their part, will not allow a cult of extremists to distort Islam's peaceful message and spirit of tolerance.

But the damage was done, and Saudi Arabia has since been forced to witness a distressing change in the way Americans perceive our country. We are concerned by what we believe is an organized campaign waged against the Kingdom by some in the United States.

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If you ask me by whom, you may hazard a guess; I will not. If you ask me why, I would admit that I am truly puzzled.

For if the objective of this campaign is to cast doubts on the Kingdom, taint its reputation, and damage its ties with America, then the people waging it are wittingly or unwittingly serving the purposes of Bin Laden.

In this campaign, the Kingdom was initially attacked for supporting terrorism, then for funding terrorism, and now our very identity as a nation is being questioned. Our faith is being attacked.

We are accused of having global ambitions and of supporting a global jihad, presumably to turn the world into an Islamic one. Come on! If the great powers on earth, from the Roman Empire in ancient times, to the United States today could not change the world in their image, do you really believe that a small country like Saudi Arabia can? How absurd!

That we are a conservative Islamic country is true. This has been known for over sixty years. If we can be accused of anything, it is our insularity, and that we prefer to be left alone. But to be accused of being an expansionist entity that seeks world domination, that's ridiculous.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is known and respected in the Islamic world as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, dedicated to the service of Muslims in any way it can. It is also known to be a moderate country that does not interfere in the internal affairs of others.

These qualities have allowed Saudi Arabia to enjoy the best of relations, even with the countries of the industrialized world, and especially those with large Muslim communities. These qualities have also served the interests of both our countries, regionally and internationally, with great effect.

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Yes, 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi. But should everything else be forgotten, including the fact that we are being targeted by the same terrorists? It is inherently unfair to allow a group of deviant criminals to taint a nation of 16 million.

I have no doubt that the campaign to malign the Kingdom will fail because facts, as President Reagan used to say, are stubborn things.

The facts are that our leaders have declared a relentless war not only on the terrorists, but on those who support their ideology, fund and sustain them, or provide justification for their acts.

We have frozen the assets of suspects, and put in place new laws and measures to ensure that no funding goes to support terror, intentionally or unintentionally. We have set up a High Commission for the Oversight of Charities in order to do that.

The facts also show that since September 11, 2001, Saudi Arabia has arrested more than 500 suspected terrorists of various nationalities.

We have also broken up al-Qaeda cells and captured arms caches, and provided significant information that helped foil terrorist attacks and save lives in a number of countries, including the United States.

Our two countries are working together in an unprecedented manner. We have set up two joint task forces that are working side-by-side to aggressively pursue terrorists and track their financing.

In this war, we shall not waver and we will show no mercy to the terrorists. And God willing, we shall prevail.

As I said at the outset, co-operation, whether in the economic field or on security matters, requires mutual understanding, knowledge and trust. And this cannot be achieved by government policies alone, but requires a public that is aware and supportive.

Our relationship was sustained for over sixty years by people-to-people contact, and if it is to continue for another sixty years, it will require maintaining trust and understanding among our people.

One of the most painful consequences of the 9-11 tragedy was the effect of the rush to take measures to secure the United States. This reaction is understandable.

But, unfortunately, some of these measures are doing great damage to the people-to-people contact.

I am speaking here about the procedures which have made it almost impossible for Saudis to visit the United States.

Virtually every Saudi family has a member who is a student, a medical patient, a businessman or a tourist in America. The difficulties they encounter obtaining a visa, and the process they go through when they arrive in America brought this interaction almost to a standstill.

This, to say the least, is not conducive to maintaining the healthy relations that existed between our two countries.

The undeniable truth is that the measures against Saudis in this respect are alienating them and negatively impacting trade and investment, without an equal return to the security of American citizens.

We sincerely hope, that the United States government will re-examine the subject and take steps to remedy this situation to assure expanding co-operation between our two countries. But there is also a domestic equation to the need to facilitate this expansion.

The measures we took to create the domestic conditions necessary for investment and growth have been and will be articulated by my colleagues.

As to the political reforms, the political institutions in Saudi Arabia are in a process of transition towards expanded participation. Legal systems and procedures are being reformed and streamlined for the benefit of our citizens and residents.

Educational curricula and teaching methods have been updated, and a Center for National

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The government is moving with deliberate speed on a very ambitious reform program designed to bring about change, while at the same time maintaining the social cohesion that binds the nation. Our leaders absolutely refuse to experiment with the lives of our people and their wellbeing.

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Reform is a response to the aspiration of the people and their needs, and not a theory in the head of some planner. It is for their benefit in order to provide them with good governance and transparency.

It is self-evident that stability is a necessary requisite for change and reform. For the Middle East to develop, the Arab-Israeli conflict must be resolved. And for peace to take place between the Palestinians and Israelis, both sides must want it at the same time. The issue is not one of personalities, but one of politics. Both sides have responsibilities.

Although the Palestinians did maintain a ceasefire for six weeks to allow for negotiations to start, Israel continued its assassination of Palestinians, expansion of settlements and the construction of the infamous wall.

Israel faces a choice. I cannot articulate this choice as clearly as or as eloquently as the following, and please bear with me while I read you some lines about this choice:

The writer asks Israel, and I quote:

"Do you want the greater Land of Israel? No problem. Abandon democracy. Let's institute an efficient system of racial separation here, with prison camps and detention villages. Qalqilya Ghetto and Gulag Jenin.

"Do you want a Jewish majority? No problem. Either put the Arabs on railway cars, buses, camels and donkeys and expel them en masse –or separate ourselves from them absolutely, without tricks and gimmicks.

“There is no middle path. We must remove all the settlements – all of them - and draw an internationally recognized border between the Jewish national home and the Palestinian national home.

"Do you want democracy? No problem. Either abandon the greater Land of Israel, to the last settlement and outpost, or give full citizenship and voting rights to everyone, including Arabs.

End of quote

These lines were not penned by a radical Arab, but by Avraham Burg, the former Speaker of Israel's Knesset, and the former Chairman of the Jewish Agency. He is currently a member of

the Knesset for the Labor Party.

Mr. Burg also provides the following advice, and I quote:

"There is time to change course, but not much. What is needed is a new vision of a just society and the political will to implement it." End of quote.

I cannot add anything to this. I do know, however, that without settling this dispute, all endeavors in the region become difficult, if not impossible including Iraq.

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With regard to Iraq, we hope that the international community will devise a concrete plan to help it emerge from its present difficulty. It is difficult enough, in the present unsettled condition of the Middle East, to deal with the Iraqi situation.

Certainly the dialogue about Iraq in the United Nations before the war, during the war, and even after the war, has not been helpful by any means. This debate has considered everything under the sun except what to do to help Iraq.

The removal of Saddam Hussein - to the good fortune of the Iraqi people - should have been the opening for a healthy debate to create the positive changes the Iraqi people deserve.

Iraq is a proud and ancient nation, and it has the people and resources to manage its future. The priorities should be set by the Iraqi people not outsiders.

The international community must assure the unity and territorial integrity of Iraq while it transforms itself according to the wishes of its people. Those who can help should do so with good will. Recrimination and accusation only stymie efforts.

It is our hope that the turmoil our region has undergone in the past few years will be replaced by stability, prosperity, and peace. For this to happen, we must focus on finding solutions to the region's problems, and improve the lives of its inhabitants.

The United States can play a constructive role by providing leadership, talent and resources. And the U.S.-Arab Economic Forum can help shed light on the importance of trade and economic development, not only to the region, but to American businesses as well.

As Arab-Americans you are a bridge, which links America to the Arab world. You have an important role to play, and should take pride in your heritage which has become, thanks to you, a valuable part of the American mosaic.

You can play a crucial role in sustaining and strengthening the bonds between America and the lands of your ancestors. As loyal Americans of Arab origins, you will certainly have great influence in determining the course of future Arab-American relations.

Thank you.

Source: SaudiEmbassy.net

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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

You can contribute your ideas and feedback to the SUSRIS through direct email to: info@SaudiUSRelations.org

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