

***Saudi-European Relations:
Towards a Reliable Partnership***

Address by
Minister of Foreign Affairs
HRH Prince Saud Al-Faisal
to the
European Policy Centre

Brussels, Belgium
February 19, 2004

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests and Friends:

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be with you today and to address this center of European policies. I thank the organizers of this meeting for the opportunity to explore avenues of understanding and cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the European Union, the Arab World in general, and the world of Islam beyond.

History, geography and basic common sense provide ample rationale for recognizing the value and practicality of building a strong and viable partnership between us. The benefits of free trade, economic globalization, and technological advances argue the point. We need frequent communication and more candid dialogue to understand each other better. This is especially necessary now that both regions have been overtaken by events that challenge pre-conceived attitudes and assumptions. Let us not allow the political, cultural, and religious misunderstandings of the past to continue and affect adversely the future. It is my intention today to suggest to you some thoughts that may be useful to begin this process.

From the outset let me state our strong and clear conviction that change and reform are necessary in the Arab World if we are to truly advance. Such reform action must begin at home to ensure the welfare of the people by providing good governance and equality in the eyes of the law.

Islam, as a religion, a culture, and a way of life, will certainly have to play a pivotal role in maintaining the social and political bonds during this otherwise turbulent period. I hope to show the relevance of this point despite the prevailing Western view that Islam is an obstacle to modernization.

Over the past several years, Saudi Arabia has initiated a process of reform that we hope would pave the way for a brighter and enriching future for our people. These reforms are comprehensive in scope, integrated in implementation, and they are to be realized with deliberate speed. We are fully aware that partial, minor, and isolated reforms are not sufficient to meet the challenges, or to develop the opportunities the future holds. Rather, what is needed is a comprehensive reform program that includes political, legal, administrative, economic, and educational components; hence the need for deliberation.

Our political and institutional reforms have so far included the enactment of the Basic Regulation of Governance (which defines the rights of the citizens and the duties and obligations of the Government), the establishment of the Consultative Council and regional councils, and a timetable for municipal elections.

Our administrative reforms include the restructuring of public administration such as the Supreme Petroleum Council and the establishment of new institutions such as the Supreme Economic Council, the Investment Authority, and the Tourism Commission.

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Judicial reforms are of paramount importance. They include new regulations covering judicial procedures and the establishment of the Independent Public Prosecution Authority.

Our regulatory reforms include more than twenty-five new legislations on foreign investments, insurance, financial markets, taxes, and control of money laundering and other fiscal irregularities. New and effective measures are being introduced to eliminate corruption.

Our economic restructuring reforms include the establishment of regulatory agencies to accelerate privatization in the fields of communications and information technology, water and electricity, the establishment of industrial and technological zones, and financial markets. Saudi Arabia is actively seeking to join the World Trade Organization, and has successfully completed many rounds of bilateral negotiations including an agreement with the European Union.

Saudi Arabia has emphasized the need for regional reforms by actively promoting the recent establishment of a Customs Union within the Gulf Cooperation Council, and by proposing a comprehensive reform pact in the Arab League with strong emphasis on concrete steps towards the establishment of an Arab Free Trade Zone by 2005.

It is axiomatic that reform is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. To be effective and sustainable, reforms must meet - among other requirements - three basic criteria:

1. That the reforms contemplated shall address the specific needs of the community.
2. That the reforms meet with popular approval and consent as much as possible.
3. That the reforms take into consideration the due process and cause no drastic social upheavals and unnecessary hardship.

For reform is not a mere slogan or a field for risky experimentation. It is an ongoing process where adaptability and continuity are essential. Within this framework Saudi Arabia is trying to evolve and adopt reforms rather than imposing them from above, taking into account the diverse views of its people, while maintaining the unity of the country and the cohesion of its society.

As a consequence, the Center for National Dialogue was established with a broad agenda including, but not limited to, reassessment of the standards of education; dealing with the emergence of extremism; the essential role women should play in society; and institutional development. Diversity and tolerance are the guiding principles. So far two rounds of talks have taken place successfully. Those who attended included individuals, advocates of numerous and diverse views from different regions of the country as well as representatives of the various religious factions of Islam in Saudi Arabia, with strong participation of Saudi women.

It is noteworthy that the Independent Commission for Human Rights was established: all organs of Government will be accountable to it in case of

any breaches or complaints. Its independence is assured by its administrative and financial autonomy.

The cornerstone of our reform effort is firmly rooted in the area of human resource development, with special emphasis on female education and employment. In the early 1960s the Government introduced modern education for women for the first time, despite active opposition and misgivings by traditionalists. Today, the openness of Saudi society is attested to by some hard facts:

- 49% of the 4.3 million students in general education are female.
- The number of female high school students exceeds that of males.
- More than a third of all government civilian jobs are occupied by women - which is, by the way, not far from prevailing figures in some European countries.

Along with the progress in education, there is progress in health care. Life expectancy at birth increased from 54 years in 1975 to 71 years in 2000, making Saudi Arabia among the three countries with the highest rate of increase in life expectancy in the world according to UN statistics.

In the field of communication there are almost eleven million telephone lines at a rate of 47 lines for every 100 persons and nearly a million participants in the Internet. Saudi Arabia has the largest digital access within the Arab World. Our youth are in contact with their counterparts in this new and more open society. The Government is taking effective measures to remove all restrictions on access to information.

Our reform efforts, though implemented gradually, are cumulative in effect. Gradual change may seem slow or less impressive to some, but if reforms are to endure and be effective, they have to respond to the will of the people and maintain the unity of the nation.

In the past formidable challenges were met with a steady increase in our ability to adapt and change without damaging the basic fabric of our society. So-called "experts" predicted in the 1950s and 1960s that revolutionary regimes in the region will bring about the collapse of our State.

In the 1970s and 1980s we were told that huge oil revenues would have permanent destabilizing effects on the underpinnings of our society and our social and political structure and institutions. In the last decade of the previous century we were told that external threats coupled with declining oil revenues will doom our very existence as a stable and developing nation. And now we are told that our society consists basically of zealots and fanatics; who cannot recognize their problems let alone solve them. In short, our demise continues to be arbitrarily predicted.

It is true that we faced formidable challenges in the past, and that current developments confront us with serious issues. Yet, the dynamics of history provide great challenges as well as immense opportunities. Is it therefore beyond the realm of possibility that those experts who continue to predict doom and gloom scenarios for us have misjudged and underestimated the resiliency of Saudi Arabia, or the adaptability and creativity of our society?

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Facts speak for themselves. We are still here and I predict, God willing, here we shall remain.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests:

While it is true that there is a need for reform in the Arab World, historical precedents attest to the fact that change cannot be imposed from without. This is particularly the case when a largely Western historical experience is projected on a different setting, such as the Islamic World or Saudi Arabia.

Take the issue of secularism for instance. This proposed remedy to our problems will certainly herald the most unpredictable and uncontrollable consequences, given both the actualities of faith and the level of adherence to religious values throughout the Islamic world, particularly in Saudi Arabia.

The majority of critics who are pro-secularization draw upon an extrinsic, albeit diverse, Western historical experience, wherein the Church had exerted considerable political power and control. It is this historical precedent that is transposed to the different setting of the Islamic World, and to Saudi Arabia in particular. For the vast majority of Muslims, religion is not the basis for a theocratic rule, but rather a necessary moral check on the misuse of power by governments while providing Muslims with a sense of community, in Arabic: '*Ummah*'. Religion is the most essential element in the unity and cohesiveness of Muslim societies.

Proposals for immediate secularization will not put an end to the influence of religion; rather they would, in all likelihood, create a vacuum that will be filled by extremists. In fact, the revolutionary fundamentalists of today and their extreme manifestations are much more the product of Western secular trends and cultural influence, with the rebellious and individualist values it instills, than of Islamic religious education and Islamic values and traditions of the *Ummah*.

Individualism in Islamic tradition has never been expressed in political terms. Islamic political thought in general is based on the primacy of the community (again the *Ummah*), rather than that of the individual.

In fact, individualism has been seen as the harbinger of '*fitna*' or apostasy. Today's Islamic extremist political streak was influenced by, and indeed imitates, the radical ideology that prevailed in the West in the previous century.

Therefore, there should be no fear of Islam as a religion or of the strong ties of Muslims to their faith. On the contrary, Islam is a safeguard that can be the most effective deterrent against extremism and chaos. We should not allow a small minority of renegades to tarnish the image of this great religion, and remove our most effective weapon against them from our hands. The *idée fixe* in the West that religion is restricting or preventing Muslims from modernization is not only wrong, but suggests an enduring determination to cast the Arab or Muslim in the age-old stereotype of the backward, uncivilized and superstitious character, who should be dragged kicking and screaming to the presumably high standards of reason that propels Western Civilization. The legacy of the

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colonial era in the Arab World, including the notion of the white man's burden, this notion gives ample proof that applying readily available solutions from the outside just does not work.

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The framework for mutual understanding and cooperation is there. What is needed is the goodwill and dedication to implement it. We must not allow a minority of terrorists and extremists to fill the minds of our youth with hatred, bigotry, and stereotyping. It is high time that we all assume our joint responsibility in this regard.

Arab youth, representing the vast majority of Arab citizens, have many attributes in common with their European counterparts. They have similar hopes and aspirations for a better future, similar wishes and dreams, and even similar fears and anxieties. More often than not, they watch the same films, read the same books, listen to the same music, and surf the same web sites on the Internet.

Making use of the great innovations in communications and information technologies, we should be able to build on these common denominators and defeat the irrational messages of extremism, terrorism, and racism.

The battle for the hearts and minds of the youth can and must be won. Extremists on both sides can only succeed by alienating us from each other. We should spare no effort in emphasizing the shared community of interests between Europeans and Arabs, in increasing the opportunities of common understanding and human contacts, and in identifying the vast and multi-faceted areas of possible cooperation that would allow us to view our future with optimism.

We can give a strong impetus to this process if we cooperate to return to the road of peaceful negotiations. The two-state initiative for the Arab-Israeli conflict provides an urgently needed solution. Blaming the Palestinians alone is neither fair nor practical. As is well known His Royal Highness Crown Prince Abdullah proposed a peace initiative, which was unanimously adopted by the Beirut Summit. The initiative is a realistic peace plan that complements the Quartet's 'roadmap'. 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.

Human development and economic prosperity are the key to a better future in the Middle East. Both the European Community and the Arab World have a great deal to gain from that pursuit, and it would go a long way in cementing our cooperation to bring peace and stability to this troubled region. Occupation, the cycle of violence, extremism and terror must come to an end. This urgently needed result can only be attained if we work together to achieve a better understanding, build greater cooperation, and arrive at fair and just policies.

Re-occupying Palestinian territories, continuing the daily humiliation of the population, building settlements and walls so as to unilaterally create new facts on the ground, implementing the policies of targeted assassinations, demolishing homes and uprooting irreplaceable ancient

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olive grooves, multiplying road blocks and settlements; all these are illegal according to the Geneva Convention and are hostile acts that make it extremely difficult to enable any Palestinian Government to function effectively, let alone to take the needed difficult decisions, or to convince Palestinians that the other side is truly committed to peace.

International cooperation is also needed in Iraq. This cooperation should be based on meeting the practical needs of the Iraqi people. The participation of all the nations who are capable of contributing in such an effort, under the umbrella of the United Nations, should be encouraged. The Iraqi people, after decades of suffering deserve stability, freedom and prosperity. Their needs can only be met by a representative political system that is based on national unity and not on sectarian or ethnic cleavages.

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It is not, Ladies and Gentlemen, unrealistic to hope for an end to widespread misinformation between us, to respect each other's history and culture, to move beyond negative stereotyping and discrimination, and to advance public awareness of the significance of Arab-European cooperation. It is certainly appropriate for us to cooperate to bring peace to a region racked by turmoil. The benefits for both of us are enormous. In this small planet of ours we cannot avoid each other, nor should we. It does not take a stretch of the imagination to see what great things we can achieve if we mobilize our collective resources for the benefit of our peoples.

At the risk of further taxing your patience, allow me a final comment:

You just cannot dismiss a 1400-year-old culture and civilization by stigmatizing it as merely a hatchery for terrorism. 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.

If we can transcend our prejudices, and nurture our tolerance, we can achieve great things: the schisms that divided us in the past must be bridged. It is folly to accuse each other of being the root of all evil. It is wisdom to come together for the first time, dedicated to the proposition not to misrepresent, misunderstand, or misuse our energies, but rather to clarify, comprehend, and combine our efforts.

We must not fight the wrong battle; and must forswear dissention. 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 also the very conditions that breed it.

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

His Royal Highness Prince Saud Al-Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud

His Royal Highness Prince Saud Al-Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud is the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Born in Taif, Saudi Arabia in 1940, he is the son of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz. He is married, with three sons and three daughters.

Prince Saud graduated from Princeton University in 1964 with a Bachelor of Science in Economics. He joined the Ministry of Petroleum as an economic consultant and a member of the High Coordination Committee. In 1966, he was assigned to the General Organization for Petroleum and Mineral Resources (Petromin). On February 22, 1970, he was appointed Deputy Governor of Petromin for Planning Affairs. The following year, he was appointed Deputy Minister, Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources.

On October 13, 1975, he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Prince Saud is also Vice President of the Supreme Council for Information and a member of the Supreme Council of Petroleum as well as Managing Director for the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development (NCWCD).

As Minister of Foreign Affairs, he has been a member of numerous committees for Arab and Islamic affairs such as the Lebanon Arab Committee, the Arabian Solidarity Committee, the 7-Member Arab Committee, the Jerusalem Committee and the Tripartite Committee for Lebanon.



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