

# HRH PRINCE TURKI AL-FAISAL

Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

**Volker PERTHES, Chairman and Director of *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)***

Thank you, Amr. It is not the same as it was last year and that leads nicely to Turki al-Faisal. In a year from now, Saudi Arabia will probably not be where Egypt is today and when Amr Moussa spoke about five years when the whole Arab world will be changed, what do you think about this? Saudi Arabia was certainly not immune and it took a lot of money into its hands this year to deal with social and political grievances. Where is Saudi Arabia going?

**Prince Turki Al-FAISAL, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies**

Let me start by saying that I agree with Amr Moussa that the change that has taken place in the past year in the Arab world affects all Arab countries. No-one can deny that. However, I would also like to point out, as he said and was said previously by many commentators, that that change will take place in different countries according those countries' own individual dynamics and parameters of existence, history and background. The Arabian Peninsula differed from North Africa, particularly Egypt I would say, in the sense that before the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it was never a nation, as Egypt was and as, demonstrably and I think even historically speaking, Iraq was or even what was called Sham – Syria – was. It was a collection of tribes and regional emirates that in more than one case generally fought each other over water resources and the availability of grazing lands and so on, mostly as an appendage to a stronger, as it were, imperial power that existed outside the Arabian Peninsula. This is from time immemorial.

Political unity and nationhood in the peninsula therefore began in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and people, including myself, still remember the poverty and difficult lives that we had to live before the political unity succeeded and we therefore give more value, as it were, to stability and safeguarding the links and liens that brought the political establishment of countries in the peninsula together.

You ask whether Saudi Arabia will be the same next year. Indeed, it will not be. It is not the same today as it was yesterday or the year before. Political, social and economic reform since the establishment of Saudi Arabia in 1932 has been the rule of the day rather than the exception. The very creation of the Saudi state in 1932 was an expression of political reform, bringing together what I mentioned before – the tribal and regional actors – into one political unity. The development of the state and the institutions in that political entity has taken place over the past years and political reform has therefore been an ongoing process. It has not been a process, as it were, of great social disharmony or dispute either between the ruler and the ruled but rather it was undertaken on a horizontal level, but equally on a vertical level.

The vanguard of reformers, as it were, in the Kingdom has been the political leadership that foresaw the difficulties of maintaining national unity and social cohesion and the challenges are posed not just by developments in neighbouring countries, whether in Egypt or other places, but are also the other challenges that have been a major source of activity in the Kingdom, such as the challenges of the eradication of disease. One of my elder brothers suffered from diphtheria when he was a young boy and others in the community suffered from smallpox and other diseases that literally wiped out whole communities in my lifetime. That was a big challenge. There is the challenge of education. When I went to school in the early 1950s in Saudi Arabia you could count the number of schools on your fingers. The level of literacy, whether among men or women, in those years was in the smallest figures at less than 10%? That was a big challenge for us to overcome. There is the challenge of poverty. When I was growing up the whole country was poor. In order to meet the requirements of governing in Saudi Arabia, the late King Abdul-Aziz literally borrowed



money from the merchants, as of course in those days we did not even have banks. That was another challenge. All of these challenges affected us and they continue to affect us.

The next generation will have less of an understanding or perhaps even less of a tolerance of what we had to go through when I was growing up and that is another challenge that we hope that we can meet by providing them with not just the framework for the reform and participatory government, justice and equal opportunity that they deserve but also not to expect from them that they will look at the world as we looked at the world. As regards that challenge, I think that we will have to wait and see.

However, the Kingdom will not be the same next year as it was this year. For example, in September, King Abdullah introduced a decree where the suffrage in our electoral system was expanded to include women, not simply for voting rights but also to be represented in our electoral system and for participation in the Majlis al-Shura, the Kingdom's consultative council. Just that step makes the Kingdom different today from what it was before that decision was made.

All of these changes that are taking place in the Kingdom are taking place, as I said, on a horizontal level but also on a vertical level and one thing that I can say about the Kingdom's approach to meeting these challenges of development, human rights, freedom and all the aspirations that people around the world share together and the values that Mr de Montbrial was talking about earlier have to be met by reform. Reform is no longer a choice for us. It is an imperative. For us to be able to meet these challenges of providing justice, livelihood and equal opportunity for all is an opportunity as well as a challenge.