

H.R.H. PRINCE TURKI AL FAISAL

Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

Thierry de Montbrial, President and Founder of the WPC

Your Royal Highness, first of all I would like to thank you for being with us for the fourth, if not the fifth time, at the World Policy Conference. My first question will not be totally unexpected. Saudi Arabia seems to fear the outcome of the negotiations which have started with Iran, the so-called 5+1 negotiations, and also to be concerned with the evolution of its relationship with the US. Could you comment on that to start the discussion?

H.R.H. Prince Turki Al Faisal, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

When Thierry de Montbrial says you are to come, you do. I have not been at the last World Policy Conference, but today I hope to make up for past absences. Your question is relevant, and I have heard it repeated at many events and through many people, but I think it starts from the wrong premise. That premise is that Saudi Arabia feels concerned or worried about any engagement between the US and Iran.

First of all, Saudi Arabia engages with Iran – it has an embassy in Tehran, and Iran has an embassy in Riyadh – and we have had that engagement since the rapprochement which occurred between the Kingdom and Iran in 1995, when the present King, who was then the Crown Prince, met with the then President Rafsanjani at an Islamic summit conference in Pakistan. Relations had been broken since Khomeini's time because of various events that took place in the holy places in the Kingdom, and other terrorist acts against Saudi interests in other parts of the world.

That rapprochement took place, and since then we have been engaged with Iran. The last President of Iran, Mr Ahmadinejad, met with our King at least four or five times during his reign in Iran and the King is a man who is very frank and blunt, and engaged with Ahmadinejad on those two bases, even publicly. Therefore, to consider that the Kingdom would be against American and Iranian engagement is mistaken.

Furthermore, the 5+1 talks with Iran started with the EU3 versus Iran, and then it was the EU3+1, then the EU3+2, etc., and now it is the 5+1. The Kingdom and the Gulf states particularly would like to see that progression in numbers continue once more, so that the 5+1 becomes the 5+2, with the Gulf Cooperation Council represented at these talks, because after all, the 5+1 are talking about our area, and our interests are at stake here more directly and immediately than the Europeans, the Americans, the Russians or the Chinese. Just consider the nuclear issue, not only the military aspects but also the aspect of a potential nuclear accident in a facility 120 kilometres from our shores on the Gulf, and we have very large population centres on our side of the Gulf, from Kuwait all the way down to Oman. That potential for a natural disaster exists: Iran, as we all know, lies on very unstable grounds, not just politically but also geographically, and we have seen two earthquakes in the area of the Bushehr reactor, so you can imagine our concern from that aspect. Engaging with Iran and going forward on eliminating any concerns or questions about the development of nuclear weapons is good for us.

The GCC countries met a few days ago at a summit conference in Kuwait, at which they expressed their welcome to the agreement recently signed in Geneva, but they also made the point that this is an interim agreement, and we will hold our applause until there is a final agreement eliminating any possibility of Iran developing weapons of mass destruction.

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Assuming that in the not-too-distant-future a permanent agreement on the nuclear issue, how could we go beyond that to stabilise the Middle East as a region? Putting my question another way, is it possible to have any order in the Middle East without positive cooperation between some of the major actors, including Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and



perhaps Israel, and maybe Egypt? Do you think a success in the dimension of the nuclear issue could pave the way for a more profound settlement of Middle Eastern issues?

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I am reserving my views on whether these interim talks will lead to a final agreed settlement on Iran's nuclear ambitions until we see what that agreement can be. My preferred view is that we should have a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, and in that context I will remind our distinguished audience that at the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference that was held in New York in 2010, following on from the previous NPT conferences, all the NPT signatories, including the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, agreed to have a conference on the issue in Helsinki, which was supposed to be held this month last year.

Unfortunately, two weeks before that conference was supposed to be held, the US simply issued a statement saying that there were no grounds to believe that this conference should succeed, and that therefore it should not be held. Needless to say, I disagree with that opinion, and that is where the issue of nuclear proliferation and nuclear armament should be dealt with, and to secure two things. Firstly, there should be a level playing field between all the countries you mentioned, not just Iran or Saudi Arabia but also Turkey, Israel, and Egypt, who may have views on this subject. Another aspect that is needed to make this zone free of weapons of mass destruction and a workable entity is to get two guarantees for this zone from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

The first guarantee should be that they will provide a nuclear security umbrella for the area, and I am talking about the five permanent members jointly. The second guarantee is that they should sanction any country seen to be developing a weapon of mass destruction in the area, not just by economic, diplomatic and political sanctions, but also military sanctions. This should allow for a period of, say, five years, during which the countries of the zone resolve the issues between them to make it a viable entity and to eliminate any fears or questions from any of its members.

I remember that, when I made this proposal several years ago to some European diplomats, the first response that came from them was, 'Israel is not going to accept.' My immediate response to that response was, 'so what? If Israel does not accept, let it be.' You establish the idea of the zone, the five permanent members provide the guarantees, and then you let Israel come in and negotiate whatever it is they want to negotiate, and the same goes for Iran. These are ideas that can be done more precisely and more workably, rather than devoting, as we have seen, ten or 11 years to negotiations with Iran, and yet we are still not there, and we are not sure that, even when we get there, there will not be more to come. However, it is an issue that is very much alive in our part of the world, and we require the necessary attention from the rest of the world to see that we have a stake in it.

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Regarding these ideas of yours which you have been trying to promote, how do you think they have been received by the countries which matter for this game, if I may say so? This takes me back to the question of the US, which you did not really answer.

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I do not know how these countries take it; so far I have been discussing these ideas with officials for several years without much response. However, as we see in the press and the media, not just in the US but also in Europe and in other places, there is growing attention to this issue, and there are various groups around the world which are working to promote the idea of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, whether in Europe, the US or the Middle East. Therefore, I hope they will come around to agreeing with these kinds of proposals.

Regarding the relationship with the US, since 1933, when the first oil companies starting coming to dig for oil in Saudi Arabia, we have had a very long and well-established relationship based on mutual benefits and interests. During these nearly 70 years, we have had our ups and downs. The first up, so to speak, was the meeting between King Abdul Aziz and President Roosevelt on the Red Sea in 1945; that is when the official relationship started with America. President Roosevelt came to King Abdul Aziz with the idea that he wanted to convince him to accept the principle of



settling Jewish refugees from the European theatre into Palestine, because they were being persecuted in Germany. The King's response to President Roosevelt was that if the Jews were being persecuted by the Germans, they should not be settled in Palestine, but given the best piece of land in Germany to stay in. The negotiations between the two ended when President Roosevelt gave assurances to King Abdul Aziz that he would not make a decision on that issue until he coordinated and consulted with the King and other Arab leaders.

This assurance was repeated by President Truman when he succeeded President Roosevelt soon after his death, but by 1947 and 1948, when the elections were coming up in America, President Truman simply forgot about the issue of consultation and went ahead and not only recognised Israel but provided all the necessary help for it. That also affected the relationship, and the issue of Palestine and Israel has been a continuous point of contention between Saudi Arabia and the US, culminating, if I may say, in the 1973 oil embargo. Therefore, the relationship between the Kingdom and America has been going up and down since then.

Regarding the issues of Syria, nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear talks with Iran, we have our differences with the US, and we express them publicly, but that does not mean that the relationship is only those three topics. We currently have more than 100,000 Saudi students in the US, spread all over the US in various universities, and that programme has been going on now since 2005, and it will continue, so on the human relationship aspect, the relationship between the two countries is going forward.

Regarding business aspects, America is still our primary trading partners; on other issues like defence and security, we have full strategic consultation with the US. Therefore, it is not a one-sided relationship but a multi-faceted one, where the interests of the two countries coincide on a lot of issues, but diverge on some other issues.

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Nevertheless, there currently seems to be a crisis of trust at the highest level. Could you comment a little bit on that?

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I can comment on my personal and non-official view, because I do not represent the Government, but I hear from the Saudi public that there is an issue of confidence. When you hear the President of the US give statements on topics that affect us, we take it for granted that he will stand by those statements. One issue was the so-called red lines on Syria. We have seen several red lines put forward by the President which went along and with time became pinkish and eventually became completely white. When that kind of assurance comes from the leader of a country like the US, we expect him to stand by it.

I am not saying that President Obama does not have his problems; of course he does, and he inherited a country that is almost bankrupt and in two wars, with depletion not just of material but of human lives as well, and I am sure he is thinking in terms of what is best for the US. However, when you are dealing with people, especially in the Middle East, who have long-standing interests and have engaged with you directly and without hesitation in defending those interests, you should be able to give them the assurance that what you say you will do. I wrote, for the benefit of the World Policy Conference, a paper on Palestine, and I will just read a few sentences, because they reflect on this issue, on the overall confidence and trust.

'Mr Kerry has to resist Mr Netanyahu's unceasing efforts to deflect the final status aims of the talks into an interim agreement that still denies the full rights of the Palestinians to an independent, contiguous and viable state, with its capital Jerusalem and its refugees settled through an agreed procedure between Israel and Palestine. The sight of a US House of Representatives applauding the denial of basic human rights to the Palestinian people cannot and should not obstruct the American people from supporting the inalienable rights of the Palestinians, as enshrined in all divine and human criteria, and as enjoyed by all the people of the world.'

I also go on to say that, 'Now, well into Mr Obama's second term, Mr Kerry is attempting to achieve what has not been achieved before, an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty. The world is watching and will not applaud a truncated peace. Kerry faces a pair of obdurate, sly and totally devious opponents, Netanyahu and the American Congress. They will do



everything to put a wrench in the wheel of Mr Kerry's vehicle of peace. If the President retreats from his position on compromise along the 1967 border, as he did on his red line on the use of chemical weapons by Assad, then the whole enterprise of peace between the Arabs and Israel will evaporate.'

These are expressions of what I believe affect the whole issue of trust, and if you look at nuclear non-proliferation, the US Government basically scuttled that issue of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. Looking at Syria, the President went back on many statements. Looking at the issue of reaching out to Iran and so on, it was obvious from the President's first term that he wanted to reach out to Iran. We were not surprised by that, but what was surprising was that the talks that were to go forward were kept from us, and not just from us but apparently from the other P5+1 members. How can you build trust when you keep secrets from what are supposed to be your closest allies?

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What happens now?

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We go forward. The applause for a final P5+1 Iran deal, as I mentioned before, will be withheld until we see the final issue resolved. I noticed, particularly in the past year, that the issue of six months seems to be a necessary component of any of the developments in our part of the world. You have the Iran agreement, based on a six-month interim term. You have the Palestinian issue, with six months remaining. You have other issues connected to a six-month period. I do not know what it is, whether it is connected to an Einsteinian time-space issue or simply a convenient device to keep us waiting and not upset the applecart over these six months. However, what will happen when the six months are finished? I do not know.

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Parenthetically, last time, at the fifth WPC, we had an interesting session related to the banking world around the concept of trust, and Jean Claude Trichet remembers that very well, because he was on the spot. I used the word 'trust' and you used the word 'confidence.' Do you think there is any difference between the two words?

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I do not quibble about very esoteric vocabulary distinctions, but I think trust and confidence are the same. You have to have one in order to have the other.

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What in your judgement would be the hypothetical best-case scenario before the end of President Obama's term, and what would be the worst-case scenario? We are talking about the Middle East, of course, because there are so many other possibilities.

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Regarding the Middle East, I think the talks Mr Kerry is holding with Mahmoud Abbas and Netanyahu are quite important, and I hope and wish for success there. I will keep my scepticism alive until I see what they come up with, but if they do come up with something, I think that will roll out a lot of subsequent issues that are equally affected by this matter. That to me is the crucial aspect of the relationship, not just between Saudi Arabia and the US, but also between the Arab and Muslim world and the rest of the world, particularly the West.

That problem is solvable, and everyone knows what the solution is, which is a compromise along the 1967 borders with mutual guarantees, swaps and things like that. They have talked about it in Taba, they have talked about it in Annapolis, they have talked about it in so many places, but nobody has had the political will to put it into practice. Mr



Kerry is devoting a lot of energy and effort to it, and that is to be applauded, but he will not get far without the President's full support on that. We have to see what happens there.

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You seem to be sceptical.

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I am inevitably sceptical, given what I have seen. This is not an issue that arose yesterday; it has been an issue for more than 60 years.

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With regard to restoring trust, are you saying that the Kerry negotiations are more important to triggering positive developments in the Middle East than the fate of the Iran negotiations?

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I do not think you can put it in those terms, because they are all connected, and that connection makes the resolution of one beneficial for the other. Therefore, removing a long-standing conflict from the table that has been depleting human and material resources considerably will help in pushing the other issues forward, like the nuclear issue in Iran and the problem in Syria. The problem in Syria today is not only a tragedy, but is an act of negligence on the part of the world, which continues to watch the suffering of the Syrian people without taking steps to stop that suffering. It almost reaches the level of being criminal negligence on the part of the world community, and to allow it to continue and to fester like that is unacceptable.