

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, WPC

Your Highness, last year you contributed a lot to the success of the Monaco World Policy Conference. Thanks to you, we made front page headlines. We were on the front page of the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times, thanks to your provocative answers to my provocative questions. Therefore, I think that we should try to do at least as well this year. Again, thank you very much for having agreed to conduct this dialogue this time. Thank you very much for being a regular participant and friend to the WPC. I suggest that we discuss the broad picture of the Middle East, because there are so many flashpoints in the Middle East. It would be interesting to have your view of the global picture, so why not start with this.

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

Mr de Montbrial, ladies and gentlemen, it is good to be back in Korea. Hearing the President of Korea deliver such an important speech this morning was very informative and it was equally attractive for someone like me to come and hear such words of wisdom. When I was in my previous work in the intelligence business, agents provocateurs were always a target. You can bet that you are always a target too in the intelligence business. As you said, if you ask provocative questions, you will get provocative answers.

Let me start by mentioning three issues in the Middle East, and everybody knows them. We have terrorism, we have conflict and we have what I would call the remnants of the colonial period. However, there are also new developments that have something to do with military intervention and previous colonial practises. Regarding terrorism, everybody talks about the so called Islamic State, which is neither Islamic nor a state. This is from the point of view of not just Saudi people but also the majority of the Muslim world. If you look at all the surveys that I have looked at, you will see that the group has not achieved the aims it wanted to achieve. It not only wanted to hijack the Muslim world, but also to create an area of confusion that would allow the conflict to continue.

As you know, the Arabic acronym for ISIS is DAESH. Those who know Arabic will know that I have been calling them fahesh. Fahesh in Arabic is a word that comes from the root word fuesh, which literally means "the worst of the worst". I think we should continue to call them fahesh, instead of giving them the very high value name of Islamic State. That is one aspect of how we should deal with these groups, which is not allowing them to take on these exalted descriptions that they want to show themselves as being representatives of. In terms of the media and propaganda, if they have had any success, it is because people have accepted that attitude or that guise that they put on themselves.

Let me read you one thing, if I may, which I delivered in September 2011 in the United States to an American audience. At that time, I said the following: "When it comes to difficulties facing our region, one must still admit that terrorism remains an important threat. However, it is not just Al Qaeda that continues to plot against us. There are also various emerging and re emerging non state actors who are moving in to take advantage of power vacuums created by shifting political dynamics. Governance in Libya, Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt and Syria is in such a tenuous condition, and the perfect conditions for terrorist cells to take root and conduct desperate, evil and anarchic acts are created". This is exactly what has been happening with the growth of these groups.

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When was that? When did you say that?

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It was September 2011, just before the Islamic State in Iraq became the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, or Syria. This is something that will continue to happen as long as we do not treat the illnesses and continue to treat the symptoms, and faresh is definitely a symptom. The main disease in that area is the failing states. If you look at Iraq, for example, a vacuum was created after the American invasion, which completely removed Government institutions.

After that, the Constitution was set up in Iraq and a Government was elected. The way that the proportionate system and the division of Iraqi society was devised in that Constitution allowed sectarian differences to increase rather than decrease. You had a very sectarian Prime Minister who, ironically, from day one continued to get support, not only from the United States, but also from Europe and Iran. It was the actions of that Prime Minister that eventually led to the rise of these groups, which have accepted the challenge of marginalising a large part of Iraqi society. They also took advantage of the misconduct of his Government when it comes to security and the capabilities of the Iraqi armed forces. Once faresh invaded from Syria, the Iraqi Army collapsed and you had the occupation of Mosul and other towns in Iraq.

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How do you explain the fact that Western Governments at least, and, to my knowledge, most intelligence systems, were taken by surprise? As late as June of this year, they knew that faresh, as you say, was operating, but they did not measure the scale and in particular the strength of its organisation. As an intelligent man and as an intelligence man, how do you explain that?

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I do not think I can, because there is no reason to fail to see how these groups take advantage of the vacuums. The misconduct of the Governments in Damascus and Baghdad created a situation where a big part of the population was marginalised and was available to be taken advantage of by such groups. As I mentioned in my previous statement from September 2011, one could discern that there was going to be a problem that was going to grow rather than decrease. If intelligence services in the West and other places did not manage to identify this growing threat, you would have to look into their practises.

Definitely, in our part of the world, one could see where things were coming. Even in the places concerned, in Iraq, many people were giving warnings to American officials and other officials from Europe. They said that the conduct of the Government in Baghdad was going to create this kind of situation in Syria. After the demonstrations that began to take place in March 2011, you saw developments in many European embassies and ambassadors there, even the American embassy. They were reporting back to their Governments that the situation was going to get worse unless something was done. Yet, we continue to see that the West in general, and more particularly Europe and America, is continuing to deal with the symptom rather than with the disease.

The situation in Iraq has changed because of the change of Government. You have a new Prime Minister who has offered the Iraqi people the opportunity for an inclusive Government that will give responsibility to all shades of the political and social makeup of Iraq. The right step has been taken in Baghdad. Unfortunately, in Damascus, there seems to be a universal opinion in the West, in the East and in America, that nothing can be done about the horrible way that Bashar Al Assad has been treating his own people. More than 200,000 Syrians have been killed and the majority of them have not been killed by faresh, Jabhat Al Nusra or by other terrorist groups.

The majority of them were killed by Bashar Al Assad and his supporters. Yet, ironically, you see that there is a European contribution to the fight against faresh. The aircraft that are bombing faresh are European aircraft, and other

air forces are coming from as far away as New Zealand and Australia. They are fighting faheesh in Iraq, not in Syria. For someone living in the area, it is not only confusing, but it is absolutely unbelievable. It is the same disease, with the same symptoms, and yet you choose to treat one part of that symptom and not the other. It is not just the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but other countries like Turkey, Jordan and Gulf states in general that support the fight against faheesh.

All of them have a belief. You have not just heard this from me - I am not an official of course - but from official people. Just a few days ago, I think King Abdullah was in Washington, and he made a statement that treating faheesh is not enough. You have to go to the root of the problem, which is the way that the Syrian Government has been marginalising and persecuting the majority of the Syrian people.

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What would you recommend? You talk about going to the root of the problem. What would you recommend? There is a provocative question and my question is this: do you not think that finding an agreement with Iran could or should be the beginning of a possible solution to restore order in the Middle East? That poses the question of the attitude of Saudi Arabia vis à vis Iran.

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It is not just the attitude of Saudi Arabia. I would pose this question, perhaps also provocatively. You could survey the opinion of 100% of the Syrian people as to whether they would like to see Iran participate in finding a solution to the Syrian problem. I would suggest that the answer would be that more than 80 85% of the Syrian people would tell you that Iran is our enemy, because Iran has troops on the ground in Syria, killing Syrians. It has called its allies from Lebanon, from Iraq and from other parts of the world to kill Syrians. Iran has become a partner in crime with the Government of Damascus. Inviting Iran to participate would not only be unjust, but it would be a cruel and very callous turn of events. This is in a world where we see so much cruelty taking place, but not to the scale at which it is happening in Syria.

The Kingdom has always said publicly and in private to our Iranian neighbours, 'You have to stop interfering in Arab affairs.' If you look at the belt that includes Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran, there is a very strong connection between Iranian intervention in these countries and insecurity and instability. In the case of both Iraq and Syria, there is the outright murderous attitude of people there who are supported by Iran. If Iran were to end its interference in these countries, there would be nothing to hold us back from cooperating with them.

In September this year, our Foreign Minister met with the Iranian Foreign Minister in New York. Even though the Kingdom has been inviting the Minister to come to Riyadh since President Rouhani was elected, he has not seen fit to find the time to do that. Nonetheless, they met in New York and I would make an assumption, though I was not present at the meeting. Our Foreign Minister told the Iranian Foreign Minister what the complaints of Saudi Arabia were. I am sure the Iranian Foreign Minister equally told the Saudi Foreign Minister what his complaints were. Hopefully, having exchanged these ideas and complaints, they can work out a formula where they can reach a reasonable outcome on this.

However, there will be no progress unless and until Iran stops killing Syrians and supporting these militias that go and kill others. We see it in Iraq today, where Shia militias supported by Iran are supposedly fighting against faheesh. They go into towns in Anbar province, clear out faheesh and then clear out the population of those towns. It is unacceptable, not only for Saudi Arabia, but for other countries, to tolerate that attitude from Iran. This is what the Kingdom has been proposing to the Iranians.

So far, President Rouhani has said many good things in public, having come in as an elected moderate representative of Iranian society. However, in actual fact, Iran has continued to pursue the same attitude and the same actions in Arab countries as the previous Government of Mr Ahmadinejad did before him.

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What about the other main actors of the region? I am thinking of Turkey, Egypt and Israel.

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Israel is still an occupying country. It is a country that continues to maintain its colonisation of Palestine, not only with the expansion of so called settlements. I prefer to call them colonies. However, there is also the way that it is treating its own population of Palestinians. We have seen the rise now in occupied territory in Jerusalem and in other parts, and even in so called proper Israeli territory. How can anyone expect otherwise, when a people feels oppressed and their rights are not granted? They turn to violence, because that is the only way that they can think of to remove that oppression and mistreatment.

Nonetheless, the Arab world has presented to Israel what I would consider to be a very fair and equitable solution. This consists of two states, with the borders agreed in 1967, acceptable swaps, and the return of refugees through negotiation. There will be the removal of hostility and the end of war between Israel and not just the Arab world, but the whole Muslim world. Since that proposal was made in 2002, not one Israeli Government has accepted it, even to say, 'Let us sit down and negotiate.'

We have heard from several Israeli leaders, like Shimon Perez for example, that there are some good things in this proposal. However, none of them has come out and said, 'Let us see what can be done about that.' Unless and until any Israeli Government that is in power in Israel can accept this deal, the Arabs will continue not to trust Israeli intentions, as they see the expansion of these colonies taking place in the West Bank. It is for Israeli leaders to make that decision.

Today, I was reading in the press about the present Minister for Housing in Israel, who was at a conference like this in America. He declared, 'The Palestinian problem may not be resolved. So what? There are many problems in the world that have not been resolved.' These were his words. He continued by saying, 'Maybe in 40 years' time, we will annex the West Bank, as we already annexed Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.' This is a Minister in a Government that has declared that it wants to negotiate a two state solution.

Someone on the Palestinian side, let us say from Mr Abbas's Government, might say, 'No, in 100 years' time, we are going to drive these Israelis to the sea.' Then you would see a big outcry, not just from Israelis, but from American and European leaders and from everywhere. Yet, nobody takes Israeli statements and objects to them. I think there is a double standard here that should be resolved by the Europeans and the Americans.

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There is Turkey.

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I am glad you made that clear. Turkey is an important player in our part of the world, historically, culturally and even in terms of family ties. I have Turkish blood in me. My grandmother was Circassian, she was born and raised in Turkey, and my mother was born in Turkey. That is the kind of relationship many Arabs have with Turkey. However, there are problems with Turkey from Saudi Arabia's point of view.

We think that Turkey should be very helpful in bringing stability and peace to the area. This is just on the Syrian question, where we and the Government of Turkey agree on the root causes. The removal of the Government of Bashar Al Assad is necessary to reach a solution there. However, we differ with them on other issues. They still maintain a very hostile attitude to the present Government of Egypt for example. We, on the other hand, think that we should help the present Government of Egypt.

Hopefully, with the roadmap that was devised after the removal of the previous President in Egypt, there is going to be one more step to be taken by the Egyptian people: the election of the Parliament. They have drawn up a Constitution which is quite a fair and inclusive Constitution from everybody's point of view. They have elected a President and now the next step is to elect a parliament. This is the only way that you can go to reclaim the stability and security of the Egyptian people. The Kingdom will continue to support Egypt, and it is not just the Kingdom. Even now, I think Europe and America have come around to accepting this new factor in the relationship with Egypt.

Other than that, we have no problems with Turkey. Their position on Palestine has always been very good and they have tried to intervene. I remember at one time, they were negotiating some kind of deal between Bashar Al Assad and the previous Israeli Government back in 2008. Nothing came out of that unfortunately. We will continue to agree with Turkey on certain issues and we will disagree on others.

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We can look at the external major powers, which essentially consist of the United States, the Europeans and the European Union to some extent and Russia. Do any of them have a vision about what should be done?

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I think the Russians do. If they do not know what should be done, at least they have a clear vision of what should not be done, particularly in Syria. However, we are still talking to the Russians. We had a recent visit from their Foreign Minister and our Foreign Minister visited Russia. At the recent G20 meeting in Australia, our Crown Prince met with Mr Putin. I read in the papers that they discussed issues like Syria, terrorism etc.

Maybe through these discussions we can hopefully make use of Russia's very strong position in Syria. As you know, they helped to bring in Geneva I and Geneva II. One of the ironies of Geneva I and Geneva II is that they proposed the establishment of an interim government. This was in both Geneva I and Geneva II. Yet, when the Arab League made that proposal to the Security Council a couple of months before that, the Russians vetoed that proposition. There is some kind of discrepancy there, which I hope they can clarify through these engagements we have with them.

They also have questions about terrorism, because, as you know, they have this Chechen problem and other problems in Russia. We try to tell them that if you solve the issues in the Middle East, these problems of the nature of violence and so on will hopefully decrease in other places as well. It is these awful pictures that people continue to see on television, YouTube, Facebook and other means of communication and people being killed and massacred and so on. These bring out this violence and very nihilistic and anarchic attitude from some people. Yes, they are from our communities, but it is not just our communities which are delivering young people to fahesh. Look at how many Europeans and Americans and so on have joined fahesh. It is a problem that affects all of us and treating it in such a manner is the best way to go about it.

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You say that you agree with Turks in particular that the Assad regime should be overturned, but by whom would it will be replaced?

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It should definitely be replaced by an inclusive interim arrangement, as happened in Iraq. If you look at the Arab League proposal from the end of 2011 and 2012, it envisioned a Government made up of the present setup. It even named Bashar Al Assad's Vice President as a representative of that Government. This is in coalition with the opposition. France, Saudi Arabia, the US and other countries recognise the Syrian Coalition Council as being the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. You can have that engaged in it.

There are ways of bringing people in. I see that the Russians are now talking to the Council, which is a good step. They are talking to other people from within the framework of opposition in Syria. The Kingdom is not opposed to any formula there as long as it is inclusive. The problem with Mr Assad is as it is with the Iranians vis à vis the Syrian people. He is the main culprit that the Syrian people would like to see taken to the International Criminal Court, as Mr Milosevic was. How many people did Milosevic kill? Maybe it is 100,000 or 150,000. Mr Assad has surpassed that figure and will continue to surpass it. It is that kind of situation where a truly inclusive Government in Syria can be the way to resolve the problems there.

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I will ask the last question before taking a few questions. I will try to sum up. All the major powers disagreed amongst themselves in a basic way on at least one if not more issues. That cannot produce a solution. Sometimes, when Europeans think of restoring European order, the classical historical reference is the Vienna Congress, after the Napoleonic wars. Do you think it would be possible to convene a bigger Geneva conference or whatever? This would involve the main powers in the region, the regional powers, and the main outside powers. This would assume that there would at least be an agreement on the desirability to get to an agreement. Even that is not certain, of course. Do you think what I am saying makes sense? If it does not make sense, which is possible, what would be the alternative?

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It seems the President of France has an idea like that vis à vis the Palestinian issue. We read in the papers that he wants to propose an international conference to reach an agreement on Palestine. That might be good because, as we can see in the United Nations framework, that issue has been on the books for more than half a century, without much achievement there. We have just seen something which perhaps is going to be the last effort by an American Secretary of State to try and bring the Palestinians and the Israelis together. Perhaps there is a new route there for the international community to do it. It might be a way of doing that. If it succeeds in Palestine, it might take on another momentum perhaps and go to other places to resolve.

However, I would say that on issues like Syria for example, these are issues that should be resolved so that if at all possible, the Syrian people should be invited to find their own solution. Do you know how you can do that? In Syria, the major composition of the people is city dwellers, with villages and towns that have elected the representatives. They have been doing that since Ottoman times, and they have been doing that even under the Ba'ath party of Mr Assad. You have the labour unions in Syria. Like all so called socialist and Arab nationalist governments in the Arab world, they used the labour unions to maintain their influence and power over different parts of society.

You also have the tribal composition of Syria. We hear about how often faresh is killing in these tribal areas in both Syria and Iraq. Representatives of those groups can be invited to attend a national congress in a neutral capital. It could be anywhere in Europe or in Asia, perhaps in Seoul. Why not? Let them come out with their own ideas regarding a solution for how Syria can move on from being the fractured state it is now. The Coalition Council can be a member of that makeup and even representatives of the present Government in Damascus can be invited.

That way you get away from the sensitivities and the issues of who supports whom. Turkey supports that, Saudi Arabia supports this and Iran supports that. America does this and Russia does that. I think that might be an idea that could be brought to a better understanding if it is worked on. There are many people with brilliant minds here who could perhaps be helpful in promoting that idea. Perhaps the World Policy Conference can play a role in that.

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I hope so, and I hope that some brilliant minds here will bring the solution in the next 10 minutes. However, do you think the Sykes Picot borders will survive in the long run?

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Everybody has a view of the Sykes Picot borders. My view is that if we try to change the Sykes Picot borders now, where are we going to stop? Just consider the Kurdish issue for a brief period. We have Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Any consideration of an independent Kurdish state will have all of these countries in conflict with the Kurds. You can take other nationalities or ethnicities in these countries, for example the Alawites in Syria. There are Alawites in Lebanon and Turkey and there are more Alawites there than in Syria. Are you going to stop only in Syria, or is it going to go on to Turkey as well, and so on.

Maybe you can start something there, but who is going to put a stop to it? I do not think that we now have either the kind of military wherewithal or perhaps moral wherewithal that the Versailles Treaty had at the end of the First World War. Then, people accepted that borders should have been done in the way that they were.