

# The Middle East in 2015 – A View from the Gulf

HRH Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Sa'ud of Saudi Arabia

Chairman, King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United Kingdom (2002-05) and the United States (2005-07)

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18 March 2015

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## Robin Niblett

Welcome to Chatham House, delighted that you are able to be with us today for as what you can see is going to be a conversation, there is no lectern here, a conversation with His Royal Highness, Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Sa'ud.

Prince Turki, welcome back to Chatham House. I know you've been here on a number of occasions but mostly for roundtables that we've had the pleasure of doing with you, especially in your capacity as chairman of King Faisal Centre for Research in Islamic Studies, with whom our colleagues in our Middle East and North Africa programme have had the opportunity of undertaking a number of studies.

Prince Turki, as many of you know, one of the, I think, best informed members of the Saudi royal family, somebody who has played a very important role in their international relations, in their external affairs, having served for many years as the director general of the general intelligence directorate in Saudi Arabia but then also as ambassador here in the United Kingdom from 2002 to 2005 and then ambassador to Washington from 2005 to 2007, at a particularly intense time, I think it would be fair to say, in international relations around that period.

What we're going to do today, as I said, have a conversation rather than speeches. This is, perhaps, self evidently on the record, just to remind you, Prince Turki, although at Chatham House this is on the record, we are also actually live streaming this conversation to our members who are and guests who are not here with us today.

We'll start off by having a discussion and then we will open it up and get some thoughts and questions from our members and guests here within Chatham House itself, within the room.

And so thank you very much for joining us. Let me start with, perhaps the most obvious point to start with, given that your visit has now coincided with what people are saying was an unexpected result in the Israeli elections and an election which ended up with Prime Minister Netanyahu in the closing moments, really, almost of the election, explicitly making a commitment that during his premiership, under the current circumstances, there would not be a Palestinian state.

The Arab peace initiative, which you and others helped develop and which was coming back into the frame to a certain extent, now looks like it's been put back on ice.

Could I just start with you on this question: do you think the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is, therefore, going to remain a festering wound in the region for all the communities involved there or do you think it becomes immediately more dangerous in what is already a very dangerous region? We've been living with this for a long time but is this something that now you worry, as you know the region, think about it, could trigger a more dangerous context?

## Prince Turki

First of all, thank you very much for hosting me. I see many familiar faces here and it's good that they're all in one place and I can say hello to all of them and thank you for being here.

I don't think Mr Netanyahu really changed much by his statement because ever since he's been prime minister, he's resisted the idea of a Palestinian state coming into being and he manoeuvred and politicized and criticized and did all sorts of dealings and wheelings to prevent the statehood coming to the Palestinians. So his coming out and saying it is not something that I find surprising, especially in the election and as a means of, as they were saying in the media today, of galvanizing his base, which is, basically, a very right-wing part of the Israeli public.

Whether it is more dangerous or not, I think it continues to be a very dangerous development. I don't think we can say that it is more dangerous than his actions previously because his actions previously were very dangerous. Denying the Palestinians the right to self-determination and all that comes with that is a dangerous prospect and I think on both sides, the extremists now are taking advantage of this and I think on the Arab side, the extremists are very happy that Mr Netanyahu has come out the way that he has because now they can turn to the rest of us and say, 'You see? We told you. He is not serious; Israel is not going to give up anything and is going to continue with the settlement policy and, therefore, we have been justified all this time not to come into the peace process.'

And on the Israeli side, of course, I'm sure the settlers and all the other extreme right-wingers are also extremely happy because it shows that from their point of view, they're equally justified in what they have been doing in the past. So, the danger is there; it's going to continue and it's going to reflect on all of us, not just the Palestinians.

## Robin Niblett

We could do a whole conversation on that part but what I think what I should do is move around topics, maybe, a little bit at the moment and let us come back and let our guests and other members ask questions later on.

Let me just take you quickly to the other key topic on the agenda at the moment, in the region, which is the push, imminently, potentially or in the coming months or weeks to achieve a deal on Iran's nuclear programme. And I know you've been public in your statements about your and the Saudi government's concerns about the nature of the deal that you believe is going to emerge, one that would permit enrichment of nuclear material in Iran and I think you've said explicitly that you feel this will be destabilizing because it will kick off some type of competitive race within the region.

Maybe you could say a word or two about that but also, if I may ask, Prince Turki, what's the alternative? What are you, your colleagues in Saudi Arabia, others who maybe agree with you, what are you proposing that would be different? What would you be doing if you were sitting in Barak Obama's seat and pushing it on this topic of the Iranian nuclear programme?

## Prince Turki

The Americans and the Iranians have been flirting with each other and Mr Obama started the flirting in his first campaign, back in 2008, if you look back on it. You remember, he said, 'We want to get this Iran issue off the table,' and he's been very consistent in that.

In 2009, when the so-called green revolution took place in Iran, he didn't bat an eyelid then, either in expressing support of the revolutionaries or criticism of the way that they were handled by the Iranian government. And it continued. And I must say, during the interim, of course, he ratcheted up the sanctions against Iran very successfully with the other members of the Security Council, to put more pressure on Iran, which he has achieved.

But now, it seems that each side is so anxious to get over the flirtation and go towards the consummation that we're going to have a deal and how good or how bad it is, I don't know because we haven't seen the details of that.

But from my view, there is an alternative and there has been an alternative on the table since 1974, presented ironically by Iran to the United Nations in the form of then a zone free of nuclear weapons. That proposition is still on the table. Now it's become a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. And since 1995, that proposition has been at the United Nations, represented by then President Mubarak at the General Assembly meeting that year.

And two years ago, or three years ago, five years ago, 2010, the NPT Review Conference agreed to hold a session on the zone free of weapons of mass destruction in Helsinki in Finland in 2012. Unfortunately, just a couple of weeks before that session was supposed to be held, one of the convenors, the United States, declared that there wasn't enough agreement in advance to make the session successful and, therefore, there is not going to be a session.

And since then, since that date – 2012 – there have been several meetings under the auspices of the United Nations or, to please the Israelis under other auspices, because they refuse to come under the auspices of the United Nations and those sessions, sometimes, included Israel but not Iran, other times included Iran but not Israel and so we've been going around in circles, presumably to find a way to hold that aborted attempt in 2012 before the next Review Conference, which is coming up next month at the United Nations for the NPT signatories.

And that, from my point of view, that is the best way to go about ensuring that there is no proliferation of the dangerous process of enriching uranium. Once you have that, you're going to have the rest of it, eventually and the way that we understand this agreement is going to be, the base is going to be a 10 year period hiatus for the Iranians but then, after that, it's anybody's guess what's going to happen. And that is going to incentivize, not just people or countries in the area but the whole world will be incentivized to compete for uranium enrichment.

And I, as a layman, not as an expert, I would rather see a lid put on all of that now, rather than wait 10 years from now when Iran, presumably, will have then the freedom to go

beyond the five, 10 or 20 per cent that they're given in this agreement and shoot for a nuclear weapon.

### Robin Niblett

Are there security guarantees that the United States and allies could offer to a country like Saudi Arabia that would make it feel sufficiently secure for it not to be involved in enriching nuclear material for its own power and other requirements if Iran has that right? Or is it the case that Iran is able to enrich nuclear weapons and there is nothing that allies can do that would make us feel secure?

### Prince Turki

My preference for the zone is that it would be a level playing field for everybody and not just Saudi Arabia or Iran but the whole area, from Iran all the way across to the Atlantic, including the Arab countries and maybe Turkey as well.

So that is where I would rather see any guarantees coming to the area by having the zone established then, and not just the United States but the permanent five members of the Security Council would then offer a nuclear security umbrella to the zone and not just to Saudi Arabia. That would be a better guarantee than any unilateral or any other formulation for a guarantee.

### Robin Niblett

Let me just keep moving on with a couple more topics, then we'll definitely open this up. Just staying with the United States for a minute, there certainly is the impression and it has been written a lot about and, I think, colleagues from your part of the region have definitely commented on this, that they feel the United States has disengaged, at some level, from the Middle East, maybe not entirely strategically but that the choices that are made in how the United States engages are more selective; one can take Syria as an example, that whether the United States is tired of the persistent conflict in the Middle East and, at the same time, the Arab uprisings that took place initially in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, drove a bit of a wedge between our traditional allies like Saudi Arabia, that have seen the benefits of gradual reform and stability, versus the United States that felt it went with where the majority of the population seemed to want to go.

Can this relationship be... can we put Humpty Dumpty back together again? Can the level of trust that existed prior to 2011, maybe one could say prior to 2011 but, certainly, prior to 2011 be reconstituted, in your opinion?

### Prince Turki

It wasn't just Saudi officials and I or others who commented on the United States lowering its engagement, if you like, in our part of the world. American officials have said so, including President Obama and we must take him at his word. I'm glad he didn't put it in red line terms but that is something I think that we have to live with and there is no other solution for us.

We continue to have excellent relations with the United States as envisioned and as seen by the various contacts that we've had, our officials have had with President Obama. He's made a trip to the kingdom when the late King Abdullah was still alive; twice he was in Saudi Arabia, or maybe three times, I don't remember now and he made a special effort to come to see King Salman when he succeeded King Abdullah. And I'm sure at that level of the relationship both leaders have reached an understanding of where they want to go with the relationship.

Sitting outside that circle of leadership discussions, the United States has a credibility gap, if you like. I remember when I was growing up in the 1960s, the election at that time between Kennedy and Nixon, there was the missile gap that was supposed to exist and it turned out that it wasn't; it was really the opposite where the US had superseded.

So maybe I'm living under false visions here. But there is a credibility gap for the United States and not just in the kingdom. I see that reflected everywhere. And that gap is going to take time to overcome and it needs action and not just words.

## Robin Niblett

And where would you like to see action?

## Prince Turki

I'd like to see action in Syria, frankly. And I think it's not just the United States, I think the whole world community is criminally, criminally responsible for the death of more than 250,000 Syrians because of the way that they have treated with Bashar al-Assad and his regime that continues to kill Syrians.

Yesterday, in the new, I don't know if you heard it or not but chlorine gas is now used by him on civilians, not on fighters or Fahesh or – you'll have to wait until I explain what Fahesh is – and others in the field and I think that is unacceptable and action can be taken and I proposed publicly before that in Syria we need to have several things.

The first thing, we need to have no-fly zones on the border with Turkey and on the border with Jordan. Secondly, the coalition council that more than 130 countries recognize as being representative of the Syrian people, should move to Syrian territory under protection of the no-fly zone and act as a Syrian government in Syrian territory. And thirdly, we should offer the best support for the Free Syrian Army.

Many of you here, probably, and others discount that there is any efficacy in that. I would disagree, because in my view, the Syrian people in general, are opposed as much to Assad as they are opposed to Fahesh and al-Nusra and the other groups there. And if they saw any sign of support for the Free Syrian Army, they would galvanize their efforts and support the Free Syrian Army.

But all of these things, of course, are up to the decision makers to make and I see no way that they can be convinced, unfortunately.

## Robin Niblett

You said that most people are against Assad or, at least, wouldn't it be the case that different people are against different groups, that in the end, even Assad is potentially seen as a better protector of the interests of his community, as he might see it and even some of the other minority communities in Syria, than any Free Syrian Army or any other group, even they're moderate?

## Prince Turki

Well, if you look at the Syrian jails, and I haven't but others have, there are as many Alawites in prisons, in Syrian jails as there are Sunnis, Christians, Jews or whatever. So Assad has been very democratic and, therefore, I don't think Assad necessarily represents protection for certain minorities, definitely not the Alawites. And so, equally, Fahesh and the other groups that operate on Syrian soil, the terrorists, they don't represent the Syrian Sunni majority.

And that's why I say that the majority of the people there would support the Free Syrian Army, which still maintains its non-ethnic, non-sectarian positions on all issues.

## Robin Niblett

This brings me to my last question then I'm going to open it up for those of you who'd like to ask questions. Islamic State, Daesh or as you call it, Fahesh – and I'll let you explain why you used that term in a minute – could that act as a uniting force, it's appearance, it's relative success across that borderland area between Iraq and Syria? You've got Iranians fighting against Daesh right now at the same time as you have coalition forces undertaking the same actions. Could it act as a unifying, maybe too strong a term, or at least a hatchet burying catalyst that could open opportunities for greater regional coordination if they can be defeated? Could the emergence of Daesh have a bit of a positive outcome in the longer term in your opinion?

## Prince Turki

Let me explain first why I call it Fahesh. Many of you who know Arabic will know the word Fahesh means 'obscene' and the Arabic acronym for ISIS is Da'ish. So I coined the word Fahesh to describe Daesh because they're more applicable to them as the word Fahesh than Daesh. Da'ish in Arabic, of course, means 'al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham', which means Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; it's all a sham. And they're definitely not a state, they're definitely not Islamic and they don't control Iraq and Syria.

So, Fahesh is a much better word for them and I wish the media here, particularly the Arab media and I see two or three prominent ones already in here, would use that word instead of continuing to give them what that they so obviously want to get, which is recognition as being a state and as being Islamic.

On this issue whether they were galvanized, sure; we see already in Syria we have a coalition of countries that are fighting Fahesh on the ground. In Iraq, we have another coalition fighting Fahesh.

But that's where the problem exists. Even in that galvanization of people around it, you find separate theatres of operations fighting the same enemy and that is unacceptable, that disjointed military campaign. It is never going to succeed in rooting out Fahesh because Fahesh is left to operate differently in different places and I'm guessing that you're talking about rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. That seems to be a very popular subject wherever I go and people ask me about it.

Two things that will never change in our relationship with Iran: geography; unfortunately we can't cut off the Arabian Peninsula and sail away and lay anchor somewhere near Finland or near Sweden or...

## Robin Niblett

I was wondering which neighbour you were going to lay anchor next to. Finland, yes.

## Prince Turki

So we're stuck with geography. It's been thousands of years that we've been stuck with these people.

The other one, of course, the other one – and I'm serious about this and I say it in the friendliest of terms – the other thing that keeps us together is our religion. We worship the same god, we follow the same holy book, we have the same prophet and the history that has existed since 1400 years. Look at it, for God's sake, Iran is ruled by a man who claims Arab descent. Khomeini wears the black turban because he believes that he is descended from the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

Now, this black turban should be a means for us to be together, rather than separating us and from that context, I would say that the kingdom has been trying year in and year out, even during the worst presidency that Iran had under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to engage with Iran, not just on issues of interference in Arab affairs but even on overcoming the Shia-Sunni divide.

In 2012, in Ramadan, the holiest of holy months in the Muslim calendar, the late King Abdullah called for an Islamic summit conference in the holy city of Mecca and the subject of that conference was to overcome the Shia-Sunni divide and Ahmadinejad came and all of the representatives of Muslim countries attended and they all agreed to set up a study group or a centre for overcoming this divide to be established in the city of Medina in Saudi Arabia.

Alas, since then, nothing has happened, despite the urging of Saudi Arabia. And other such indications of where Saudi Arabia has been; you all remember the Iraq support group that existed after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Who was it composed of? It was composed of the United Kingdom, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Jordan and at that time, even Syria was included.

So, this engagement with Iran has never been a taboo subject for Saudi Arabia and we are still trying. Our foreign minister met with their foreign minister in New York last September and I wasn't there, of course, but I can imagine that each side presented a list



of complaints to the other about our conduct. And our minister renewed the invitation to Mr Zarif to come to the kingdom to carry on the discussions further. He hasn't arrived and hasn't done so since President Rouhani was elected.

And you heard at the conference in Amman, that we attended together, that the main issue holding Zarif from coming there was an issue of protocol because Zarif wants to come and meet with the king. And at the time of King Abdullah, of course, King Abdullah was ill and he couldn't meet him so he didn't come. But if there was any serious intent on the part of Mr Zarif to engage in a conversation that will end up in results, he would have come.

These protocol issues are, I think, silly and insignificant and he was going to be given the highest accommodation available. And he's going to meet his counterpart, he's not going to be ignored, he's not going to be insulted and put in a tent instead of a palace and things like that. So, issues of protocol are silly to use as an excuse.

But the kingdom is ready, willing and able and has said so publicly. Recently, Prince Saud, our foreign minister, in his press conference with Mr Kerry, just two weeks ago, mentioned that if Iran was a constructive player in the area, we'd be more than happy to coordinate with them. But they have to stop being a negative player. And that is where it stops.