



### **HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud Chairman, Board of Directors King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Gulf Affairs: What are the main security challenges facing Saudi Arabia today?**

**HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud:** In terms of external problems, it is of course the continuing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine and Lebanon and the driving and inimical policy of Iran that instigates these instabilities and helps to keep these areas in turmoil. If you look at Iraq, the Iranian influence there has been to establish sectarian militias that compete with and play a dual role as the national armed forces in Iraq, which of course weakens the central government and allows these militias to operate independently of government sovereignty. In Syria, Iran has been supporting the brutal regime of Bashar Al-Assad against the Syrian people and in the process they have not only established militias in Syria, based on sectarian lines, but also invited fighters from other countries to come and help Bashar Al-Assad like Hezbollah from Lebanon; Asaib Ahl Al-Haq from Iraq; and Shia volunteers from Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. In Yemen we see an Iranian hand in supporting the Houthi rebels against the legitimate government of Yemen. On a lesser scale, but equally dangerous, of course, is their interference in Palestine. In the press recently, I read an article about Gaza, where all of a sudden there is a Shia militia.

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Obviously, the members of that militia were recruited by Iran through Lebanon and taken to Iran where they were indoctrinated in *Wilayat al-Faqih*, which is the basic ideology of Iran and has become an Iranian tool. Of course, I mentioned Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is equally a militia that operates outside the sovereign government of Lebanon. In Bahrain, Iranian support for the Shia dissidents, also based on sectarian lines, is flagrant. Not only in terms of economic and military support but also considerable media backing. We saw this past year an attempt by Iran to infiltrate Kuwait, where a whole cache of military hardware was uncovered by the arrest of an Iranian-supported cell of Kuwaitis. So, this is what Saudi Arabia is facing in the areas around it.

Unfortunately the international community, and more importantly our traditional friends in the United States and Europe have turned a blind eye to the Iranian interference in the affairs of these countries with the hope of signing this so-called nuclear deal that they have done. President Obama said that this would open the door for Iran to become a constructive player in the area, bringing peace and harmony to the region. So far, since the signing of the deal we have seen absolutely no diminishing of Iran's insidious and subversive activity.

**Gulf Affairs: Over the past few years, Saudi Arabia has suffered from terrorist attacks at the hands of Daesh. What can the kingdom offer that the other combatants against Daesh cannot?**

**Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** First of all, I think the kingdom can show that it is more appropriate to call them *Fahesh* rather than Daesh. Daesh, in Arabic as you know, stands for the Islamic State of the Levant. Whereas *Fahesh*, which is a more appropriate name for them, means obscene, and they are an obscenity. Not only in their actions, but also in their ideology. The kingdom has been fighting that kind of cancerous growth for many years, beginning with Al-Qaeda. Against Al-Qaeda, the kingdom succeeded in putting them down and arresting whatever leadership they had, disbanding their cells and hopefully rehabilitating the youths that had been attracted to that ideology but had not committed crimes, this of course through the Prince Mohammed Bin Naif Center for Rehabilitation. This is a program that aims to reconstitute the religious, political, and social attitudes of some of these young people so that they become constructive members of society rather than destructive ones. It has been a model for other countries to similarly pursue and learn from. *Fahesh* particularly, of course, has conducted attacks inside the kingdom, and the government is confronting them the same way that it did Al-Qaeda, getting to the route of their ideology and conduct and arresting adherents and supporters, financial or military or otherwise and preventing the dissemination of literature they want to export to young people. The rehabilitation center shows *Fahesh* supporters for what they are, basically a deviant offshoot of Al-Qaeda that espouses Kharijite ideology that has been condemned historically, since they first started in the days of Sayyidna Ali, May Allah Bless Him. The kingdom is participating in the international coalition to eradicate Daesh from Syria. More recently, the establishment of the Islamic coalition to fight terror shows how, in the broader context, the kingdom has taken the lead in grouping 34 countries to fight together against these groups, whatever their names are and wherever they may operate.

**Gulf Affairs: In March 2015, Saudi Arabia led a military intervention in Yemen which continues to the present day. What are the objectives of this intervention and what would be an acceptable compromise to the Yemeni civil war?**

**Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** In September 2014 the Houthi religious-cum-political militia in Yemen, decided to take matters into their own hands and invaded Sanaa and overpowered the government, arrested the

## IV. Interviews

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President and the Prime Minister, various ministers, and declared that Yemen had become an Islamic state following the Shia sect. They allied themselves with supporters of the former President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had resigned his post as a result of a political program initiated by the GCC countries, led by Saudi Arabia, to bring stability and political coherence to Yemen after the uprisings that took place in 2011/2012. From September 2014 and until members of the coalition that the kingdom established began to operate in Yemen, the Houthis and the supporters of Ali Abdullah Saleh extended their writ over most of north Yemen. In the meantime the imprisoned legitimate President of Yemen managed to escape from where he was held and escaped to Aden, the second city of Yemen. From there he issued an international appeal for help given that he had been overthrown by this militia and supporters of the former president. In response to the appeal, Saudi Arabia and other Arab and non-Arab allies joined together to form the coalition to return the legitimate government to Sanaa—this has been the aim of the exercise. As you said, in March the coalition began operating with various means, not only militarily but also political, social and diplomatic. Since then, the legitimate government has regained ground that had been overtaken by Houthis and supporters of Ali Abdullah Saleh. It is now in the process of expanding its return to other cities and areas in northern Yemen with the aim of returning to Sanaa and establishing the president and his government in the capital.

We are supporting the government of Yemen as it is recognized in the international sphere. The international community recognizes Yemen; this is the sovereign Yemeni government that we support, extending from the border with Saudi Arabia to the borders with Oman.

### **Gulf Affairs: The US and other powers have recently reached an agreement with Iran on its nuclear program. How does Saudi Arabia view this agreement and how is it reacting to it?**

**Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** The kingdom publically expressed its support for the agreement, with the view that it will prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons during the terms of the agreement. The P5+1 have reached this procedural agreement with Iran, to prevent it over the next 10 to 15 years. There are commitments on Iran as well as the P5+1 on that issue. The kingdom probably, I don't speak for the government as you know, holds the view that Iran's extraterritorial ambitions continue despite the signing of the agreement. Hence the kingdom has taken the leading role in opposing Iran's extraterritorial activity, wherever it may be.

In my view, Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries are duty-bound to prepare themselves for the time that the terms of that agreement end. By establishing the wherewithal, human or otherwise, to meet any challenges that might come from Iran on the nuclear issue once the agreement comes to an end. The GCC, as I said many times in public before, has to consider all options to meet that challenge and not deny itself any of the options to meet it.

### **Gulf Affairs: In Syria, Saudi Arabia is reportedly providing military and financial assistance to rebel groups fighting the Al-Assad regime. What is the Saudi government's position on a solution to the conflict?**

**Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** The kingdom has played a role in the Vienna talks that have led to the United Nations-sponsored political process, with certain conditions on the ground. To that end, the kingdom hosted meetings for the Syrian opposition groups in Riyadh and there is a meeting being held here as we speak

to formulate the opposition's position toward various issues that have been raised in the Vienna and Geneva communiqués. The kingdom has always sought a political solution to the conflict in Syria. The kingdom has also always maintained, that in order for a political solution to be had, the balance of military forces in Syria has to be equalized, between the opposition and the government.

On the ground, of course what we see is that the government in Syria has direct support from Iran, with troops and military equipment and intelligence support and financial support. The Al-Assad regime also has support from Russia, which has been conducting an aerial bombardment of positions of the opposition and it has the support of various militias that, as I mentioned before, Iran has brought into Syria. On the other hand, the Syrian opposition, which the kingdom supports, is the genuine representative of the Syrian people encompassing all its factions and ethnic and religious makeup, whether Sunni, Alawite, Druze, Christian or Kurdish. However, it has not been provided by the international community with the defensive means that could allow it to balance the other side's overwhelming military superiority. Also this opposition, which is genuine and Syrian and so on, has been on the frontline of opposing the terrorist groups who have appeared in Syria as a result of Bashar Al-Assad's policies. So the opposition are fighting on both sides, and the fact that it remains in the fight is testimony to the support that it is getting from the Syrian people in general.

It is a pity that the world community continues to simply just look on at this situation, and I think that by doing that they are criminally negligent in allowing Bashar Al-Assad and his Iranian and Russian supporters to allow the continuing massacre of the Syrian people. We are seeing that the number of those killed has reached half a million, with more than half of the population—a huge 11 million Syrians—displaced, and now 4 or 5 million of them have become refugees around the world. This is unacceptable and this is why the kingdom continues to support the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Coalition not only against Bashar Al-Assad, but against the terrorist groups who are in collusion with him against the genuine Syrian opposition.

**Gulf Affairs: In the past few years, Saudi-US relations have been described by observers as uneasy due to a divergence on policies and approaches in Arab countries affected by popular uprisings. How would you describe current Saudi-US relations? What have been the main areas of disagreement since the upheavals that we have seen in the Arab world?**

**Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** In September of last year King Salman visited Washington and a joint statement was issued by the king and US President Barack Obama in which they expressed agreement on various issues, one of which was the P5+1 agreement with Iran, and the king's statement mentioned that he accepted President Obama's assurances that this deal would curtail Iran's capability of developing nuclear weapons. But they also agreed that they would cooperate and coordinate in opposing Iran's extraterritorial activities. If you look at the statement you will see exactly how that was worded, alongside the expansion of the economic relationship between the two countries, a continuation of the scholarship program sending Saudi students to the US and other agreements that have to do with social and economic issues. That for me is a reflection of where the Saudi-American relationship stands today. Previous to that of course, there was and continues to be a disagreement on how to best deal with the situation in Syria.

The kingdom supports the calls of the Geneva talks to provide continual support to the Free Syrian Army and the other nationalist opposition groups that are fighting both *Fahesh* and Al-Qaeda on one side and

## IV. Interviews

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the Al-Assad regime on the other. America has not come around to that, but we have seen more proactive American engagement in supporting what are called the Syrian Democratic Forces which are composed of Kurdish and some Arab tribal groups in the north of Syria. Hopefully, we can bring the two sides more closely together in widening the support for the opposition to balance the assistance that Iran and Russia are giving Al-Assad.

**Gulf Affairs: Saudi Arabia notably led an Arab Peace Initiative in 2002, and sponsored a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas in 2007. Have the uprisings that engulfed the Arab world since 2010 eclipsed the Palestinian issue in the Saudi foreign policy agenda?**

**Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** Not from Saudi Arabia's point of view; the kingdom remains a consistent and constant supporter of Palestinian rights and demands. As you've seen in the recent speech that the king gave to the Shura Council, the king expressed Saudi support for the Palestinian people. What can be taken from that is the understanding for Saudis that Palestine is the kernel of the issues in our part of the world, and we will continue to support the establishment of a Palestinian state according to the Arab Peace Initiative.

*Interviewed by Zaid M. Belbagi on 4 January 2016, Riyadh.*