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A Dialogue Among Civilizations

Address to Seton Hall University Ambassador Prince Turki Al-Faisal October 14, 2003

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in your distinguished University. You know that I studied at that other Catholic university, but I went to a prep school that is not far from here, the Lawrenceville School. New Jersey was my home for more than four years, and they were enjoyable years. Like some of you, the hardest thing for me at both prep school and university was to keep my enjoyment level down and my academic level up. I ended up with a mixed bag—admittedly favoring the enjoyment over the academic! At both Lawrenceville and Georgetown, I felt welcome.

Do you know how many of us Saudis went through your schools, universities, academies? More than 500,000 over the past fifty years. You multiply that by eight, which is the number in an average Saudi family, and you have 4 million Saudis who have been directly affected by America. That is nearly one quarter of the Saudi population. Until recently, thousands of Saudis regularly visited the U.S. for health care, education and vacation. Over this last half century, many myths have developed in America about Saudi Arabia. These myths were propagated by so-called “experts” on Saudi Arabia, and yes, even by Hollywood. Most of these experts have never been to Saudi Arabia nor have some of them even talked to a Saudi and yet “they” confidently assert their expertise, whether in book form, in newspaper articles, or on radio and television. And they know everything about us: our religion, our social structure, our economy, our education, and even our souls. Now, you may ask, what are these myths? And I will tell you. But first let me put them in historical perspective, in the following manner: before September 11th; after September 11th; and those that cross over September 11th. I shall try to analyze them as I list them.

Before September 11th, the myths were the following:

Saudi Arabia and the United States came together in a deal that exchanged oil for security, with the U.S. buying Saudi oil in return for securing the safety of the Kingdom. The reality is that what brought us together is much more than that. In 1945, when King Abdulaziz, the Founder of Saudi Arabia, met with President Franklin Roosevelt, the two men hit it off immediately, with Roosevelt commenting to his

Prince Al-Faisal is a member of the Saudi Arabian Royal family with more than twenty-five years of experience in government and diplomatic service to the Kingdom. From 1973-1977 Prince Al-Faisal served as an advisor to the Royal Court. In 1977, he was named Director of General Intelligence. In January Prince Al-Faisal was appointed Saudi Ambassador to the Court of Saint James in London.

aides after the meeting that he learned more in a few hours about the Middle East from Abdulaziz than he had from all of his advisors. At the time, the rest of the Arab world was under either British or French colonial rule, Abdulaziz looked upon Roosevelt and America as the champion of freedom for all of the oppressed people in the world. By that time as well, the Saudi experience with American pioneers was unfolding. In 1933 King Abdulaziz received in Jeddah an American philanthropist and industrialist, Charles Crane, who was touring the world in his yacht. The King was complaining about the lack of water in the Kingdom, and his guest offered to send him a top geologist to look for water. Twitchell was his name. He came, he saw, and he advised the King that instead of looking for water, he should look for oil. Shortly thereafter, a group of scientists and engineers came to the Kingdom and started not only ARAMCO, but they also started the human contact between Saudis and Americans. More than 200,000 Americans have lived, with their wives and families, in the Kingdom on and off since that time. Several hundred, if not thousands, were born there. They are called "Aramco kids." Today there are more than 30,000 Americans, men and women and children, living and working all over Saudi Arabia.

Since its founding in 1932, Saudi Arabia has been in the forefront of countries that promoted and practiced a responsible and moderate foreign policy.

The other myth, pre-September 11th, was that the Al Saud family would not be able to weather the pressures of modernization amid the growing winds of Arab nationalism and socialism that were sweeping the area, with coup d'états and revolutions erupting everywhere. The Al Saud, Al Hamdulillah, Thank God, have managed to disappoint all of these predictions. And why? Why did we not suffer the fate of King Farouk of Egypt, or the Hashemite King of Iraq, or the Shah of Iran? We did so because we always thought of ourselves and acted as one people and never ever did we think and act as if we were above the people. Even today, the King and the Crown Prince hold a public Majlis, or audience, for any Saudi citizen who wishes to complain personally about a grievance, or present a petition. Many a petitioner or complainer will address them by their first name. There is no subservience nor servility proffered. Neither is it expected. Later on I shall refer to the fact that it is the leaders of the Al Saud that initiate reform in the country.

After September 11th, the myths are the following:

Saudi Arabia is the "kernel of evil", as one of these so-called experts has claimed. That we breed terrorists in our schools and mosques; that we created the Taliban and Al Qaeda; that we are hell bent on converting the rest of the world, whether by force, or by dictat, to our brand of Islam - Wahhabism. We are the dreaded Wahhabis who infest our kids, from kindergarten, until they leave college, with hatred and bigotry for everything and everybody who is not Wahhabi. Phew.

Since its founding in 1932, Saudi Arabia has been in the forefront of countries that promoted and practiced a responsible and moderate foreign policy. We have

never waged war on anybody, except in self-defense; we have been a responsible member of the United Nations; we have been leading the Arab world in making peace - look at the Fahad Plan of 1982, which brought all the other Arab countries to espouse peace, as an objective, and not war, as had been the case before. Look at the Abdullah Plan of 2002, also adopted by the rest of the Arab world, which calls for total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories, in return for total peace from the Arab world to Israel, including diplomatic and normal relations. These are two initiatives by Saudi Arabia. There are countless others. Now you tell me, is this the work of an evil country?

The Taliban came into existence in 1995. The Kingdom had stopped giving aid to all, and I repeat, all Afghan parties in 1990, when the then Mujahideen parties, having chased out the Soviet invader, turned on themselves, and civil war ensued. Not one single penny has gone from Saudi Arabia to any Afghan, including the Taliban, since that date. However, from 1980 to 1990, we had the honor and privilege of working hand in hand with your government, and our Pakistani brothers, in supporting the Afghan people in their just struggle to repel the Soviet Armies. We are proud of our record then, as you must be.

In 1990, after we had stopped all aid to the Afghans, Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al Thawahiri, an Egyptian who was convicted of terrorism in Egypt, founded Al Qaeda, which defined its aim as the liberation of all Muslims from what they called the Crusaders and Zionists. You know of course who their first target was? Saudi Arabia. We were that first target because we had agreed to station, in Saudi Arabia, American Air Force units that would provide protection to the people of Southern Iraq against Saddam's Air Force. This was part of the Safwan Agreement between Iraq and the Allied Forces led by the US and Saudi Arabia, which brought to an end the war to liberate Kuwait. In 1993, having gone to the Sudan, bin Laden began to issue statements denouncing the Kingdom and after all attempts to persuade him to stop this campaign failed, he was stripped of his citizenship in March 1994. In 1995 he struck his first terrorist blow. It was in Riyadh at the National Guard training building. From then until now, bin Laden's primary target has been the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. All that you read or hear about Saudi support, whether in terms of money or even sentiment, for him is baloney. In a poll taken by the Zogby Group, an American polling firm, taken last month, more than 90 percent of Saudis disagreed with or condemned bin Laden. I was sent twice to Afghanistan in 1998 to try to convince Mullah Omar to hand over bin Laden to the Kingdom in order to bring him to justice. If you don't believe me, just listen to bin Laden himself commenting on my efforts to have him deported to the Kingdom. (ABC TV in an interview at the end of 1998 with John Miller.) As far as charity organizations are concerned, since 1993 we have been tightening the accounting procedures of all of these institutions, not only to make them accountable, but also to make them transparent, and last year we established a higher commission for charities to be responsible for, and accountable for, every penny spent on charity. Now only checks are accepted as contributions to charities, and that is to make sure that all monies are accounted for.

There are those who say that bin Laden and his murderous airplane hijackers were born and bred in Saudi Arabia; therefore Saudi Arabia is a country that breeds terrorists. I say to you that bin Laden founded a vicious and murderous cult, using Islamic phraseology to attract acolytes and turn them to his evil deeds when they reached Afghanistan. A perfect example is the group of young people, American born and bred, in upstate New York, who led normal lives until they reached bin Laden's training ground. There, they were turned into Al Qaeda operatives. You can read about them in last Sunday's New York Times, detailing how they were enticed to go to Afghanistan and then they were submitted to intensive mental and physical training turning them into bin Laden followers. There are other nationalities - British, French, Egyptian, Moroccan, who made up Al Qaeda. Does the school system in upstate New York breed Al Qaeda members? How about the school system in Britain, France, and the other countries. As to the fact that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudis, well now we have the admissions of none other than bin Laden's Chief of Operations, who is held prisoner by U.S. authorities. He says that bin Laden personally chose the fifteen Saudis to carry out the 9/11 hijackings out of a pool of several hundred Al Qaeda operatives, from different nationalities. At that time it was easy for Saudis to get U.S. visas. His aim is to destroy the close and strategic relationship between our two countries.

Now, a brief word on that much used and abused word "Wahhabism." In 1734, a religious reformer, in the mold of John Calvin or Martin Luther, started preaching his ideas in Central Arabia. He had traveled in much of the Arab world, which was then mostly under Ottoman rule. His message was direct: Muslims had deviated from the original teachings of Islam. They had corrupted the worship of one God, Allah, into the worship of many intermediaries, like saints, idols, even trees and rocks. He preached the return to the fundamentals of Islam, the primary article of which is that there is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet. This man's religious sect was Sunni, meaning a follower of the Prophet's sayings and deeds, from the teachings of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who is one of the four Sunni Sheikhs whose teachings make up the Sunni branch of Islam. This man's name was Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. In his search for support, he struck a deal with the ruler of one of Central Arabia's then flourishing towns, his name was Muhammad Al Saud. When the two Muhammads succeeded in uniting all of Arabia, even the holy cities of Makkah and Medina, the Ottomans struck back. Being the seat of the Khalifate, Islam's paramount political leadership, the Ottomans cleverly started a campaign to counter the growing strength of Ibn Saud and Ibn Abdulwahhab. The Khalif in Istanbul accused the two Muhammads of preaching and propagating a heretical new sect called Wahhabiyah, deriving from Abdulwahhab, and all sorts of accusations and stigma were heaped upon the Wahhabis then. Pretty much what is happening today. The Al Saud follow the Hanbali school of thought and the Kingdom's judicial system is ruled by all four of the Sunni schools of thought. Do we have bigots in Saudi Arabia? Of course we do. But you have them here too. Do we have people who denounce other religions and express hatred towards them? Of course

we do. But you have them here too. Just listen to what the Reverends Graham and Robertson have said about Islam and the Prophet of Islam (Peace Be Upon Him). Do our society and religious teachings breed terrorists? If it did then how come the more than twenty brothers of Osama bin Laden did not become terrorists? They have the same background; they went to the same schools.

The last myth I am going to refer to is one of many that cross over from before September 11th to after September 11th. It is the myth that the Al Saud are too disunited and decrepit and corrupt to be able to initiate reforms needed to meet today's challenges. What can I tell you? Saudi Arabia compressed the development of 300 years into seventy years. We came from a land of tribal feuds, warring city states, and colonial power infringements, to a united country, where merit is based on personal talent, rather than tribal affiliation. Where thousands of hospital beds tend to the care of more than 22 million people. Seventy years ago, there was only one hospital, badly equipped, and sparsely staffed. Where there are more than 5 million young men and women going to school at all levels. Where the literacy rate went up from 5 percent to 90 percent. When seventy years ago there were only two or three schools. Where highways crisscross the deserts and mountains so that commerce and transport thrive when seventy years ago there were only a handful of cars and journey by camel would take days where now they take hours.

The memory of September 11th has traumatized both our peoples.

Economically we came from a subsistence level to a thriving economic environment that makes Saudi Arabia the largest economy in the area, with the largest stock market in value and in number of shares listed in the Middle East; with the widest per capital ownership and usage of computers, and the largest market for books and newspapers and magazines. The Kingdom is also the largest advertising market and per capita personal expenditure is the largest in the area.

Politically we came from a land without any government institutions to a country that not only has government ministries and departments but also a National Consultative Assembly and Regional Councils. Our constitution is the Quran and the Sunnah, and in 1993 King Fahad established the Basic Law defining the line of succession, where merit and capability decide who succeeds as king. The law also rejuvenated the Consultative Assembly, and defined the government's obligations to the citizen, and the citizen's responsibilities to the government. Over the last five years, we have streamlined and trimmed the government; we have established an Investment Authority and a Higher Economic Council. In his speech to the Consultative Assembly six months ago, the king set forth his reform agenda in six points:

1. Redefine and invigorate the country's median religious stance. Our Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) described Muslims by saying, "We are a people of the middle. Moderation and tolerance are the key words in

- our religious practice”.
2. Redouble the efforts to widen the job market by widening the economic base, joining the World Trade Organization, and improving the efficiency of the bureaucracy.
 3. Widen political participation.
 4. Review the lot of women and make sure that they participate fully alongside men in the continuing development of the Kingdom.
 5. The establishment of two Human Rights Commissions, one independent of the government receiving complaints from whatever source about any infringements; the other, within the government to oversee government departments' adherence to the principles of human rights.
 6. Review and improve academic curricula to make sure that they prepare students, male and female, for today's needs. And also to make sure that religious instruction follows the median way, which I mentioned in the first point.

This is a brief review of Saudi Arabia. I shall finish with the following points:

In the hunt for bin Laden, we have been working with your intelligence and security departments since 1997, when a joint Saudi/American committee was established. Its aim is to pursue and review all intelligence on bin Laden and Al Qaeda. The committee was set up at Saudi Arabia's request.

The Kingdom will never forget the courageous and selfless stance that the American people took in 1990 as they stood by us when Saddam invaded Kuwait.

There are bigots and zealots amongst our two peoples. Let them not come between us. Our two peoples should look forward to more cooperation, and not recrimination.

The memory of September 11th has traumatized both our peoples. For those who lost loved ones, there will be nothing that can compensate for their loss. But they will always retain the best memories of those whom they lost.

For us, alas, we will always carry the bane of the fifteen. It is a memory that is not only painful but will always remain as a stigma that we bear.

I have just learned today that the Council of Ministers, at the King's behest, has just approved the holding of elections at the municipal level for Municipal Councils. I can tell you that that is but the first of many steps in Saudi Arabia's march towards a better future.

Thank you.