

The Heart of the Conflict in the Middle East: A Conversation with His Royal Highness Prince Turki Al-Faisal

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His Royal Highness Prince Turki Al-Faisal

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first like to thank you for having me speak to you today. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is an excellent institution that does important work by following the ideals of its founder to help establish stronger international laws and organizations. As Andrew Carnegie himself said, "As I grow older, I pay less attention to what men say, I just watch what they do." This institution has definitely done just that, and the world is a far better place for it.

And in the spirit of going out and getting busy, I offer my most frank opinions on how the Israelis and Palestinians might arrive at peace after many, many years of conflict. My prescriptions will be based on the tenets of the Arab Peace Initiative proposed in 2002 by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. They will also be based on my own analysis of the situation, especially relating to some of the difficulties that seem to have stalled President Obama's recent efforts to convince the two parties to cooperate for peace. I speak to you of the actions that have fomented discord and sought to bring about instability in our region; of governments and quasi-governments that have tried to capitalize on the resulting existing troubles to further their own political ambitions and ideological influence, although they are lacking in merit. Further, I discuss what I believe to be mistakes on the part of various parties, politicians and pundits relative to the conflict. And finally, I tell you of what I believe to be the path to a true and lasting peace, and remind all here of how the Saudi leadership has worked with our friends and allies to help realize this vital goal.

As this learned audience well knows, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is the cause of numerous threats to peace and prosperity in a wide number of locales around the globe. Yet despite this international resonance, I impress upon you what I consider to be the element that is the core of the conflict; I am speaking of the plight of the Palestinian people. For too long they have been denied justice. For too long they have been denied the basic human rights that many of us take for granted. And for too long they have been denied what is absolutely reasonable for them to seek- the opportunity to live in an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital, on the lands occupied by Israel in 1967 which are recognized by the international community as being illegally occupied by the Israelis.

Some of you may disagree with my definition of what is absolutely reasonable, but let me remind you that I am far from alone, and that while of course all in the Arab world agree with me, there are also many Americans and even Israelis who share my view. Those of us who believe in this position take as our guidepost U.N Resolution 242, issued shortly after the Six-Day War in 1967 in an attempt to forestall further bloodshed by providing a framework to secure peace. The resolution called for:

“The establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, with the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict.”

There are numerous opinions as to the exact meaning of the resolution. To me it is very straightforward: “occupied territories” clearly means the lands taken by the Israelis in the 1967 war. There is no room for ambiguity in this, and the passage of time will, I believe, show that those who oppose this specific Israeli violation of international law are overwhelmingly in the right.

Since 1967 we have seen subsequent resolutions passed in the U.N, each meant to breathe fresh life into a stalled process to force recognition of basic truths. Yet peace has remained elusive and the conflict has been enlarged and spread like a cancer across borders. Populations other than the Palestinians are now suffering the results of Israeli aggression.

For instance, Lebanon, which, in 1948, accommodated the fleeing Palestinian refugees by the tens of thousands, has been ravaged by war and it has seen its lands invaded and occupied by Israel time and again. The Shab’ah Farms and other areas remain occupied by the Israelis to this day in direct violation of U.N. Resolution 1407. From the bloody conflict initiated by the invasions of 1978 and 1982 to the bombardment and invasion of 2006, the people of Lebanon have suffered greatly. This has given rise to Hezbollah and allows it to supplant the role of the legitimate government and seeks to further its own political agenda; even more, they do so while purporting to stand for Lebanon’s beleaguered people and even Islam itself.

The numbers of the dead and displaced by war in Lebanon are staggering. Before the Taif Accord in 1989, more than 100,000 people had been killed in the fighting there, many of them civilians. Over 900,000 had lost their homes. The Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982 killed more than 50,000 civilians and wounded more than 100,000.

In Lebanon, of course, foreign hands can clearly be seen manipulating the strings of this brutal tragedy. The 2006 attack on the Israelis and the capture of their soldiers was calculated for effect, and it had maximum effect. In response, an onslaught of widespread destruction and indescribable horror was unleashed by Israel that destroyed villages and towns, neighborhoods and hospitals, killing more than 1200 civilians and thousands more wounded: and whereas Hassan Nasrullah, the leader of Hezbollah, has publicly expressed his regret for launching his provocative action, the Israelis have not issued a single word of remorse. Once again, the people of Lebanon - many of them innocent children - paid the price with their lives for foreign-led ambitions in the region.

Hamas has watched and learned from the Lebanese model and followed in its footsteps, capitalizing on Israeli brutality and aggression to gain a prominent voice in representing the Palestinian people as the Palestinians are drawn deeper into the morass of violence and suffering which they have so long endured. Gaza is a land where there are no victors save the brutality of the Israeli war making machine, and the struggle between extremists on both sides is sadly measured in the blood of innocents. Two years ago, in only 22 days there were more than 1400 people killed in Gaza by the Israelis with another estimated 5300 wounded. Only a small portion of those killed - 236 - were combatants for Hamas. And the targets sought by the Israeli forces seldom had any military value. Nearly half of Gaza’s clinics were damaged as well as 15 of the 27 hospitals located there. Hundreds of factories and thousands of homes were destroyed. Then, to add insult to injury, Israeli commandos stormed a peace flotilla of ships, this year that sought to bring food and medicine to the suffering people of Gaza who, for years, have been enduring an inhuman, illegal and immoral blockade. So widespread and indiscriminate has the killing of Palestinian civilians by Israeli forces

become that the U.N.'s Goldstone Report characterized the events there as possibly falling into the category of "war crimes" or "crimes against humanity."

I highlight these tragedies relative to Hamas and Hezbollah not only to point a finger at the Israelis but also to show one of the most important yet overlooked aspects of the conflict, which is the dampening effect on extremism in general that a lasting peace would have in the region. If we address the desperation of the people of Gaza, restore to them the dignity accorded citizens of an independent Palestine, the appeal of violent resistance will wither. Remove the yoke of crushing poverty imposed by blockade; lift the occupation and the denial of self-determination, and the appeal of extremism wanes. With the removal of extremism comes the growing friendship with the West. We have seen the bonds of friendship with West strained where they should be strong, and we have witnessed serious mistakes that have lessened the West's credibility in the region; credibility that is not only vital to the peaceful resolution of the Palestinian and Israeli conflict, but is vital to the progressive international relations between regions that benefit all people. In other words, it is deeply in the West's interest to end this conflict as it will serve as a major victory in the war against terror, for much of what we call "terror" is able to find its recruits due to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Since I am advocating that the West take a more assertive approach to ending the conflict, let me outline some of the principles that I believe should form the backbone of that approach. I do so by constructing my position by dismantling the position of the opponent. In this case, my opponent is the neoconservative philosophy in American politics.

It has been almost ten years since President George W. Bush took office, giving the American neoconservative philosophy- with its zeal for shaping the world through unilateral demands and military action – its days in the sun. The starkest example of the ascendancy of this group was the war in Iraq. After enormous cost in human lives and treasure, as well as the tattering of American ideals at home and respect abroad, President Obama has begun to bring this country's role in that debacle to an end, leading many Americans to believe that the neocon movement has died, the victim of its own failed, delusional ambitions. However, recent declarations by neocon thinkers regarding the current Palestinian-Israeli peace process show it to be very much alive and still pushing inhumane and aggressive policies. It is these policies, personified by neocon advisers, American conservatives, and Zionist extremists, that continually throw a wrench into the progress of peace. This recent election will give more fodder for these war mongers to pursue their favorite exercise, war-making. We must not only resist these dangerous policies if we want peace, but even those American advisers who do not consider themselves neoconservatives must realize that by not taking a strong enough stance against Israeli actions, they offer tacit submission to the neoconservative position - a position that has gotten us nowhere save into the bloody rut we now inhabit.

For a summation of this position, I turn to one of its top advocates, Robert Satloff, the Executive Director of the pro-Israeli Washington Institute for Near East Policy. In a Foreign Policy article entitled "Three Temptations on the Road to Mideast Peace," Mr. Satloff gives suggestions to President Obama on how he might conclude a successful peace deal. In sum, these suggestions are:

- Ignore Secretary of State Clinton's stance of "not one more brick" on the issue of settlements, which I prefer to call by their true name, colonies, let the Israelis begin to build again, and push the Palestinians to not "inflate the significance of settlement construction."
- "Withstand the pressures to intervene prematurely at the first sign of impasse" so that the two parties - especially the Palestinians - can make "the compromises a real agreement demands."

- Given that "Israel and the Palestinian Authority are less likely to take proverbial 'risks for peace' when an ascendant Iran is able to withstand US-led sanctions," Obama should "prevent Iran's march toward nuclear weapons capability" by "projecting strength and resolution on the Iran nuclear challenge," and while not specifically declared, this would seem to imply the use of force, which is the United States' "last repository of credibility."

Before exploring each of these suggestions and revealing them as fallacious, counter-productive and even dangerous, it's important to point out that they are par for the neocon course. They are an apologia for Israel's actions, a deprivation of all Palestinian bargaining positions, a denial of the injustices done against them, and an attempt to divert attention from the real issues via the Iranian bogeyman. And they would stand in the way of peace.

On the issue of colonies, it is astonishing and insulting for anyone to suggest that the Palestinians simply ignore the fact that Israel is openly breaching its commitment to the road map by ending the moratorium on new colony building. Not only does this suggestion ignore the Palestinians' compliance with the road map (in the face of Israeli activities, such as incarcerating thousands of Palestinians, including pregnant women and children), but it attempts to downplay an issue that the Palestinians have repeatedly declared to be central. Why is the colony issue so central? Because it is the most glaring example of Israel's indifference to international law and its continued willingness to flagrantly sidestep agreements.

Let's look at the facts. In the first half of 2010, during the colony moratorium, the West Bank saw 603 new housing starts, 1,135 housing completions, and 3,009 active housing unit construction projects being carried out by the Israelis. How, one might ask, could Israel justify such actions? It does through flawed legal arguments that entirely misinterpret the British Mandate authority over Palestine and the UN Security Council Resolution 242. The Palestine Mandate states that "nothing should be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine," and the UNSC resolution 242 states that neither side should gain territory under the international legal principle of the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war." No nation in the world accepts Israel's spurious legal justifications for going against these agreements, so is it not unconscionable to ask the Palestinians to do so when it is they who suffer most directly as a result of them?

As the Reagan Plan stated as far back as September 1982, "The United States will not support the use of any additional land for the purpose of settlements during the transition period. Indeed, the immediate adoption of a settlements freeze by Israel, more than any other action, could create the confidence needed for wider participation in these talks. Further settlement activity is in no way necessary for the security of Israel and only diminishes the confidence of the Arabs that a final outcome can be free and fairly negotiated." Asking the Palestinians to ignore ongoing colony construction is tantamount to asking them to accept subjugation from the start.

The second suggestion is that the United States restrain from making proposals in the course of peace talks. What, one might ask, are the American mediators to do other than to help bridge impasses? The neocon answer is simple - they are to force the Palestinians to make concessions and to preserve the Israelis from having to do so. This can be seen in the reason Mr. Satloff gives as to why American proposals have no place in the negotiations. They would, he says, "transform the diplomacy into a US-Israeli negotiation, relieving the Palestinians of having to engage in the business of bargaining." Why, exactly, would American proposals transform the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations into American-Israeli negotiations? Because the American proposals would justly make demands on Israel, and that is exactly what neocons are desperate to prevent.

Finally, Mr. Satloff's third suggestion, his most vaguely far-reaching and therefore his most dangerous, is that the US should do something (specifics withheld) to project "strength and resolution on the Iran nuclear challenge." Why is this important for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process? Because (apparently) Israelis and Palestinians will fail to respect America if Iran is able to gain nuclear weapons because America, having declared it will not allow this development, will be seen as weak. Not only does this show a lack of insight about what is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian problem, which predates the Iranian nuclear issue by many years, but it threatens to start a new conflict as a pretext for ending another (we've read this script before, i.e. in Iraq, and it does not have a happy ending). No one denies that a nuclear Iran is a major international danger, but claiming that the US must take military action against Iran to push forward the Israeli-Palestine peace process is to attempt to harvest apples by cutting down the tree.

Let us not allow the ideas of the neocons to crawl from their graves of failure, but let us instead take as our directive the Arab Peace Initiative set forth by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, which calls for fair and mutual compromises and commitments by both parties. This means to act directly counter to these suggestions - to demand colony building cease immediately, to have the courage to push the parties toward compromises, and to stop using the Israeli-Palestinian issue as a pretext for attacking Iran. The last thing the world needs now is another neocon fantasy, predicated on threats rather than negotiation, force rather than diplomacy, and war rather than peace.

And now, by way of conclusion, I wish to summarize the position of Saudi Arabia toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is declared so excellently in the Arab Peace Initiative. My country has struggled again and again to stress to its many friends around the world, that Saudi Arabia stands against terrorists and extremists of any origin and we join America in tirelessly seeking to defeat those who would use violence to pursue political ends. Yet while Saudi Arabia goes about declaring this position and continually proving it in practice, we must sometimes ask ourselves - what about the Israelis? Where is the justice for those who suffer at the hands of Israel? Ought not the World in general and the West in particular, fight the continued occupation of Palestinian land by Israel as fervently as Saudi Arabia fights terrorism? Should not the clear barriers to peace represented by continuing colonization in the West Bank be vigorously opposed, and the existing - and illegal - colonies be dismantled? Shouldn't the World call upon the Israelis to "tear down the Apartheid Wall" just as vigorously as it screams against Islamic extremism?

As we in the Kingdom see it, the path to peace is clear. King Abdullah's forthright initiative of 2002 laid the groundwork for an end to hostilities: if the Israelis withdraw from occupied lands, including East Jerusalem, to their pre-June 4, 1967 boundaries and address the refugee situation through mutual agreement, Saudi Arabia and the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference will end all forms of hostilities and commence normal and peaceful relations with the State of Israel. The Quartet, charged by the U.N with seeking resolution to the conflict, should pursue this route on the road to peace.

Until that happens, Saudi Arabia must do what it must - as the birthplace of Islam, as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and as the world's energy superpower and the de facto leader of the Arab and Muslim worlds. The Kingdom must hold itself to the highest standards of justice and law. And this is why it must refuse to directly or indirectly engage Israel until it ends its illegal occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights as well as the still occupied territories in Lebanon. For us to take any steps toward any form of normalization with the Israeli State before these Arab lands have been returned to their rightful legitimate owners would undermine international law and turn a blind eye to immorality.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Saudi Arabia stands for peace, but we cannot stand alone. We need Israel's friends who should be the first in line, urging her to seek peace, instead of pushing her for more war. We need our friends in the West to recognize the importance of this opportunity to regain its stature in the Middle East by joining us in an effort to resolve the longstanding plight of the Palestinian people. The West has the ability to put out the flames of numerous regional fires by extinguishing the source of the blaze in the Middle East. By pressuring the Israelis to genuinely commit to a timetable for withdrawal from occupied lands, it will simultaneously defuse a host of lingering difficulties that the World – and the region at large – now faces.

Let us together seek the goal of all reasonable people and nations that abide by international law. Let us pursue the victory of reason over violence, of ideas over raw emotions. Let all of us come to an acceptance of global standards of behavior that recognize the rule of law over the rule of force, of negotiation over bloodshed, of right over might and let us meaningfully and substantively address those actions which stand in glaring opposition to those standards. And finally, let it be known that we will turn away from those who continue to seek violent upheaval but will extend our hands in friendship to those who seek true and just peace.

The road to peace has been long and difficult, but as Andrew Carnegie said, “Do not look for approval except for the consciousness of doing your best.” Forging success out of the many failures in the Middle East requires a Palestinian state. Let us together do what is necessary to achieve this success, and may Allah bless us in our efforts.