

A Conversation with Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud

by [Prince Faisal \(/experts/prince-faisal\)](#)

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[Prince Faisal \(/experts/prince-faisal\)](#)

Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud is the foreign minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.



Brief Analysis

The Saudi foreign minister discussed a range of issues, from Riyadh-Washington ties to the Arab warming with Israel, with the Institute's executive director.

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2

On October 15, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Saudi Arabia's minister of foreign affairs, Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud. Institute executive director Robert Satloff moderated the discussion. Read excerpts below, or click on the link at bottom for the full transcript.

Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud: As the international community continues to focus on combating, controlling, and overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic, our bilateral and global partnerships are more important than ever. One way we continue the effectiveness of our bilateral cooperation is the Saudi-U.S. strategic dialogue...The strategic dialogue allows our nations to constructively discuss the wide range of issues of strategic importance to both nations, maintain our robust institutional cooperation, and advance the extensive security, economic, and person-

to-person bonds that underpin our partnership...

What has kept our relationship, the eight-decade partnership between the kingdom and the United States, durable and strong is a mutual mission to bring people and nations together to value above all else peace and security and to prefer and always seek negotiation, mediation, and diplomacy...And now our alliance goes much deeper than just one king or one president. It's not partisan or political. It's about the best interests of both nations. I want to thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today, and I look forward to the rest of the conversation.

Robert Satloff: You said in your closing remarks that Saudi Arabia will always seek diplomacy, that you're looking for a political solution to end the [Yemen] war. How do you get there now?

Faisal: The UN representative has been trying for the last several months very hard to convince the Houthis to...a cessation of its military activities, and if that takes place, I think that lays the groundwork for a political process, and we've always said that the Houthis have a place in the political framework of Yemen. What we need is for them to give up their weapons and to focus on building Yemen through participating in the political process, rather than trying to impose their will by force.

Satloff: Some spokesmen for your government have said the judicial proceedings for the Khashoggi killing are over, yet many Americans, both Republicans and Democrats, say they are still looking for accountability for the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. How will your government meet these demands for accountability? What's legitimate to demand, in your view, and what's not legitimate to demand?

Faisal: The killing of Jamal Khashoggi was an abhorrent act...and we have stated that quite strongly. We have taken very active measures to hold those responsible accountable...We're committed to building in the safeguards and security and processes in our security services to ensure that something like this cannot happen again.

Satloff: I think it's perhaps one of the largest points of bipartisan agreement about the need for reform: Saudi Arabia needs to focus on human rights issues. Let me ask you specifically about the continuing detention of Loujain al-Hathloul and numerous other women, many of whom were activists arrested in the weeks before the ban on women's driving was lifted two years ago...Why are they still in jail, and when will they be released?

Faisal: So, human rights is something that I think we all see as very important, and the leadership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia sees that importance equally, and we are constantly working on improving the human rights situation... And as far as the individuals you mentioned, they are not detained because of any human rights activity or activities related to women's emancipation or anything. They are charged with serious crimes under our laws, and everyone is equal under the law in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Satloff: In broad strokes, we've had two U.S. policies [towards Iran] over the last decade. First was the Obama administration's focus on nuclear issues, leading to the JCPOA...then came the Trump administration's maximum pressure, which saw toughening of sanctions but not the achievement of a better deal with... It seems to me perhaps Saudi Arabia isn't pleased with either of these two approaches...What do you look for the next administration to do that neither President Trump nor his predecessor succeeded in doing?

Faisal: So, I would argue that the maximum pressure campaign, while it hasn't shown a final result yet, is working...Our vision is something like a JCPOA-plus-plus, a JCPOA that addresses the deficiencies that the original document had in nonproliferation, mainly the sunset clauses but also the issue of ballistic missiles and malign regional activities.

Our belief is we don't want a military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran or between us and Iran...We want pressure that leads to talks, and we hope that the Iranians will choose that path rather than lashing out with their military or with their ballistic missiles or with their proxies.

Satloff: In the meantime, many observers note that the Iranians are pursuing enrichment at a pace which violates the JCPOA limits but which brings them frighteningly close to achieving a nuclear weapons capability. How does this concern you? What do you think the answer to this is?

Faisal: It concerns us greatly...We supported the JCPOA, but we supported it grudgingly, because we were not involved in its formation or consulted about it...We think while there is a danger and a risk in the current Iranian regime's activities, that is something that we need to face and confront head-on rather than pretending that the regime, just because it signed on to the JCPOA, had given up on its nuclear ambitions for the long term.

Satloff: Reading between the lines of your remarks, you said all these things about progress will follow from a Palestinian-Israeli agreement, which sounded like a reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative, whose basic principle is all Arab- and Muslim-majority states will make full peace with Israel essentially the day after an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, a model which has been, shall we say, challenged by recent events of the UAE and the Bahrain agreements to have full normal relations with Israel. Now, your government has taken some steps. It has congratulated and welcomed these other countries' moves, permitting overflights between those countries and Israel. Can you imagine more incremental steps down that path as an interim stage before a final peace arrangement? Are there more interim steps like that to be had?

Faisal: I believe that the focus now needs to be on getting the Palestinians and the Israelis back to the negotiating table. In the end, the only thing that can deliver a lasting peace and lasting stability is an agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis... Peace, we see, is a strategic necessity for the region. Part of that is an eventual normalization with Israel, as envisioned in the Arab Peace Plan [Initiative], as envisioned even in what the kingdom proposed in 1981 in Fez. So, we have always envisioned that a normalization would happen, but we also need to have

a Palestinian state and we need to have a Palestinian and Israeli peace plan.

The Emirati and the Bahraini deal—one of the things they delivered is taking annexation at least off the table for the time being, which was a significant threat to the prospects for peace. So, if you look at it from that context, it does help lay the groundwork for potentially the Israelis and the Palestinians getting back to the table. More work needs to be done, but you can look at it as a positive in that context.

Satloff: The rift inside the Gulf Cooperation Council, the rift between you and Qatar. This has been going on now for three years—more than three years. What are the specific requirements that your government has to end this? Are they still the thirteen demands that were put down three years ago, or is that, shall we say, an opening bargaining position and, you know, cooler heads can prevail and find a solution?

Faisal: We continue to be willing to engage with our Qatari brothers, and we hope that they are as committed to that engagement, and if we are able to find a path forward to address the legitimate security concerns of the quartet that drove us to take the decisions we took, that will be good news for the region...I think there is a path toward that, and we are hoping that we can find that in the relatively near future.

[Download a full transcript of the discussion. \(/uploads/Documents/other/FaisalbinFarhanalSaudTranscript20201015.pdf\)](#)

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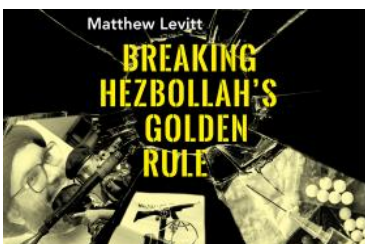
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