



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

Moderated by Washington Institute executive director Robert Satloff

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Robert Satloff: I'm delighted to welcome you to this very special event: a conversation with the foreign minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud. Before we begin, just a couple of logistical notes: First, I urge everyone to take advantage of the expertise and analysis of my colleagues at The Washington Institute on the many issues that we'll be discussing today, so please after the event please go to www.washingtoninstitute.org for incisive and insightful analysis on Saudi politics, energy, Gulf politics, and everything related to U.S. Middle East Policy. Secondly, if you have questions that you would like to filter into our conversation today, please feel free to send them to me directly at my email address, rsatloff@washingtoninstitute.org, and I'll do my best to bring all these questions into our conversation.

With that, I'm delighted to welcome our guest, Prince Faisal. Prince Faisal is marking his first anniversary as foreign minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia this month. Previously, he served as the Saudi ambassador to Germany, prior to which he was posted here in Washington as an advisor at the Saudi embassy. I understand, Prince Faisal, that you're here in Washington to launch the U.S.-Saudi strategic dialogue. So I'm going to turn the floor over to you for some opening remarks, after which I'm eager to have a conversation—His Excellency, Prince Faisal.

Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud: Well, thank you very much, Rob, and I want to thank The Washington Institute for this opportunity during this time of uncertainty. 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, which is yet another important contribution to our partnership that began seventy-five years ago with the historic meeting between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz. 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.

Saudi Arabia is president of the G20 this year and host of next month's G20 summit—now virtual, given the circumstances that we are all having to deal with, like so much of our interactions and meetings, but nonetheless a critical gathering. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the kingdom has kept the work of the G20 focused on addressing the global crisis. In March, King Salman chaired the first ever virtual meeting

of the G20 in order to coordinate a global health and economic response to the pandemic and to make sure the resources required to pursue the development of therapeutics and vaccines were available. During next month's G20 summit, we will keep the focus on the pandemic, not just for the health and safety of the G20 nations, but also—as Salman said in March when convening the G20 leaders—out of a responsibility to extend a helping hand to developing countries and less developed countries so that they can build their capacities and improve their infrastructure to overcome the crisis. Progress has been made together. The G20 has committed more than \$21 billion to combat the virus through vaccine development and therapeutics and more than \$11 trillion in stimulus money to restore the global economy. We are truly all in it together. The challenge in front of us is a shared global challenge. While COVID has forced us to socially distance and at times to nationally isolate, our pathway through the global emergency is our collaboration, and when we get through this—when we reopen our nations confidently and return to some form of normalcy—it will be because we worked together, because we did this together.

That's why partnerships matter, why strong bilateral relationships are so important, like the longstanding enduring friendship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. This year, we commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the meeting between Saudi king Abdulaziz and U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the meeting that laid the foundation for this partnership, a relationship that has been beneficial not just for both nations but for the world. Together, we defeated communism. Together, we all but eliminated the threat of al-Qaeda and ISIS [aka the Islamic State]. And together, we continue to combat terrorism and extremism by going after the men, the money, and the mindset that foments violent extremism. But that is not all. Our collaboration has contributed enormously to regional stability and development as well as global economic prosperity, and it continues to do so. Yes, there have been some turbulent waters in our relationship, some crosswinds to navigate, but most importantly, our two nations always find a way forward because our work together is too important to our nations and to the world. When we work together, we build a better, safer world.

Our region has seen more than its share of chaos and uncertainty. It has experienced decades of tension and conflict, seen legitimate governments undermined and destabilized. In places like Syria, millions of innocent men, women, and children have been victimized and terrorized, deprived of the most basic human necessities. But it does not have to be that way. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia maintains a foreign policy agenda committed to the political resolution of regional tensions, to de-escalating conflict, to rebuilding the bonds between nations, to collectively putting an end to terrorism and extremism, and to investing in economic and human development. We want a stable and secure Arabian Peninsula and Middle East so that we and our neighbors can invest in building up our nations, not tearing them down, to have a brighter future for generations to come. Our goal is to bring economic, social, and cultural transformation to Saudi Arabia at a pace and scale all but unmatched in modern history. Through our leadership's national transformation initiative called Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has already invested hundreds of billions to diversify our economy as we transform the kingdom into a regional and global engine for economic growth. We are creating a high-tech, next-generation economy, building sustainable cities for the future, opening our doors to tourism, creating opportunities for and empowering Saudi women and youth. We believe that the success of Vision 2030 will not only improve the quality of life and opportunities for the people of Saudi Arabia but also contribute to the prosperity of the region. It will represent a promising model for development in an area of the world where ideologies of extremism and chaos compete for the region's future.

We could do even more if our region were more secure and if our neighbors were all equally committed to de-escalating tensions politically, resolving disagreements, and investing in their people instead of advancing expansionist ambitions. Our approach to the region and the world is to create stability, opportunity, and economic growth through inclusion, cooperation, and multilateralism. For example,

Saudi Arabia played a central role in reaching peace agreements between countries in the Horn of Africa, and we have supported and continue to support Sudan's peaceful transition.

In stark contrast, Iran maintains a single-minded focus on undermining the health and safety of nations and communities—openly supporting terrorist groups, terrorist proxies, armed militias, and murderous regimes; interjecting itself wherever it can to create chaos and instability, as it has done in so many places, like Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and as far away as South America. It seems wherever there is trouble in the region, you find Iran. The policies of the Iranian regime and its proxies led to the political and humanitarian crisis firmly grasping our neighbor Yemen. The crisis is entirely the product of Houthi obstructionism and the Iranian intervention, callousness, and hostility. Iran and its Houthi proxies undermine peace and stability in Yemen, which led to the breakdown of its civil society and the resulting despair of the Yemeni people. Iran sacrificed the well-being of the people of Yemen to create an area of mayhem and lawlessness to use as a launching pad for extremism that endangers not just Saudi Arabia but the entire region and the world. Together with our Arab coalition and international partners, we are committed to restoring the legitimate government of Yemen, and with the United Nations, we continue to seek a peaceful resolution and negotiated settlement, but Iran and the Houthis are not interested. Every time there is potential progress, they walk away. Every time we take steps forward, like the coalition's recent unilateral ceasefire, those steps are rejected. How did Iran and the Houthis respond to our ceasefire, a space we created for people for possible talks? They responded with drones and ballistic missile attacks. Saudi Arabia and the coalition will not abandon the people of Yemen.

Nor can we ignore the security and defense of our nation and our people, which have been threatened by more than three hundred ballistic missile attacks on our soil, and we cannot ignore the potential future threat of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons and the continuing export of its revolutionary agenda through hostile and terrorist behavior. Our partnership with the United States is critical in addressing Iran's malign behavior, and we are committed to working with the U.S. so that Iran does not obtain a nuclear bomb ever, as well as ending the Iranian regime's policies and practices of interference and destabilization. We have always extended the hand of peace to Iran. We've had security agreements with them before. We have invited the Iranian president to Riyadh and even welcomed the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the 2015 nuclear deal is known]. But as we interpret these as steps toward security, Iran interprets them as opportunities for expansionism. That is why we believe the continuation of maximum pressure is the only way to reach a reliable enduring agreement which will ensure that Iran forever abandons its nuclear weapons ambition and ceases to meddle in the affairs of other countries through destabilization and acts of terrorism. This is part of our vision for the peace and security of the region, one that includes the Greater Middle East as well.

The kingdom has always been at the forefront of efforts to bring peace and security to the Middle East and to secure a just and comprehensive resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Over the years, Saudi Arabia has put forward peace proposals created to achieve and protect the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. The security of the people of Israel and Palestine has been and remains our goal, and we continue to work with our partners to find a lasting peaceful resolution. And so we welcome the recent efforts to bring the parties together toward a comprehensive peace plan, because an important step in securing regional stability in the Middle East remains a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. All other things will follow from that, and that is possible if we continue to come together with the common goal of a settlement that works for all parties. But negotiation require partners on both sides of the table. Settlements can only occur when there are partners in the process, partners willing to talk in good faith, putting some interests aside and committed to the fundamental health and security of all parties.

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. Yes, there are times when we see things differently. That's to be expected. But despite those occasional divergences, what matters most is that our relationship remains strong, that we continue to build on the foundations put in place by two leaders who didn't know each other well but knew then that our partnership could be important to the world's way forward following the Second World War.

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. Each year, more than 40,000 Saudi students study at U.S. colleges and universities, bringing our communities and people closer together, helping us to know each other, building bridges and bonds that keep our national friendship strong outside the hallways and corridors of Washington DC. And during this pandemic, many of these students, instead of returning to the kingdom, stayed in their U.S. communities—medical students and others working on the frontlines—because at the end of the day, that is what is most important about our partnership: working together in difficult times in the face of daunting challenges, but never giving up and always committed to the more secure and safe world that our leaders first imagined. I want to thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today, and I look forward to the rest of the conversation.

Satloff: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your opening remarks. You laid the table for quite a number of issues that we can discuss in our conversation, and I've already begun to receive quite a long list of questions. Let's begin, if we can, with the first regional topic that you raised in your remarks, which is the situation on the Arabian Peninsula, the situation in the war with Yemen. You said in your closing remarks that Saudi Arabia will always seek diplomacy, that you're looking for a political solution to end the war. How do you get there now? What is your plan to end the war? Do you need the Houthis to give up their relationship with Iran to do that, and what would that look like? Or is there something else, some other major trigger, that will allow this war to come to a close?

Faisal: I think the first step that we need is for the Houthis to sign on to a joint declaration of a ceasefire. The UN representative has been trying for the last several months very hard to convince the Houthis to join what the coalition has already announced, which is 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. So, I hope that they will take up the opportunity, that they will agree to a joint declaration of a ceasefire, that they will join a political process and engage with the government of Yemen and the other interested parties within the Yemeni framework, and we will support all efforts to reach a political resolution.

Satloff: And do you think this can be done while the Houthis maintain the relationship they have with Iran? Or does Iran need to alter its view of what its interests are in terms of the conflict in Yemen?

Faisal: I think Iran wants the conflict to go on, and that's why it continues to supply the Houthis with extensive weaponry, including ballistic missile drones and other equipment that helps them target not just forces of the government of Yemen but also civilian targets in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Our argument to the Houthis is that they need to focus on being a part of Yemen and on working toward the interests of the Yemeni people. They should not be a tool in the hands of Iran, and they should not work to the interests of Iran. Once they decide that they are focused on the best interests of Yemen and its people, I think finding a path forward will be easy.

Satloff: So, I think you quite rightly and accurately referred to the ballistic missile attacks against Saudi civilian targets. A recent UN Panel of Experts report on Yemen accused all parties of indiscriminate attacks. The experts also said that Saudi-led airstrikes continue to disregard the principles of proportionality and precautions to protect citizens. Now we're five years into this war. The argument that one often hears is that mistakes will happen. Why are these reports of indiscriminate attacks still coming out even from your side of the battlefield?

Faisal: So, I haven't seen the specific report you just referenced, but I will say that we take any accusation of damage or targeting of civilian targets very seriously, and they are investigated. We have a process to investigate those allegations, and when we find any cause to believe they are true, we are openly willing to admit that and hold the necessary process within our internal structures to hold those accountable, so I think it's important to understand that we take this issue very seriously and we are committed to minimizing any risk to civilians in the battlespace.

Satloff: Have you found any evidence of indiscriminate, disproportionate acts?

Faisal: We have never, no. Unintentional indiscriminate attacks by the coalition have taken place, but there are, as you refer to, errors in war. I mean, we have seen this in many conflicts, even modern conflicts in which other nations have taken part or in a complex environment, especially in a place like Yemen. So, there will be errors, and we are striving and working very hard, and I think the numbers will show that there is significant effort by the coalition to minimize damage to civilian targets.

Satloff: I'd like to move to a different topic. Now, I know you're obviously here during a political season. The Democratic candidate, former vice president Joe Biden, issued a statement very recently on the anniversary of the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and I just want to read a couple of sentences from this statement: "Jamal Khashoggi and his loved ones deserve accountability. Under a Biden-Harris administration, we will reassess our relationship with the Kingdom, end U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, and make sure America does not check its values at the door to sell arms or buy oil."

I'm not going to ask you to comment on the partisanship or on one candidate or the other, but this statement does raise two questions that I do want to ask you. First, the concept of accountability. 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: So, I mean, you're right, I'm not going to wade into the political sphere, and, yes, it's not my place, but I will say that I do agree with the candidate, Vice President Biden. The killing of Jamal Khashoggi was an abhorrent act, a terrible act, a terrible crime, and we have stated that quite strongly. We have taken very active measures to hold those responsible accountable. You talk about accountability. Accountability on a state level is mainly about ensuring that things like this cannot happen again, and that's something that the leadership has clearly indicated we're committed to. 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, that there is the necessary oversight, that there are the necessary controls in place, so that we can ensure that these kinds of things and these kinds of activities don't go on. And I think that is the prime responsibility of states, and that's how states can be held accountable. They must ensure that their relevant organs behave responsibly, and we are committed to doing so.

Satloff: So, is it fair to say, just on this point, that in your view the government of Saudi Arabia has projected its commitment to accountability and it is now essentially concluded with?

Faisal: So, I will say that you know the crown prince [Muhammad bin Salman] himself has said that there is a political responsibility in the state, and this is of course the case. Is this the end of the issue? No—because the process that we have instituted to reform our security service and to instill the necessary safeguards is something that we will have to keep going at. It is a process that needs to be constantly monitored and that we need to hold ourselves accountable to, and we will do that. We are very much committed to this as an ongoing process. It's not something that we just want to sweep under the rug. This is not the case. We are very much in the mindset that we cannot allow something like this to ever happen again.

Satloff: The second piece of what the vice president said was to raise the concept of a “reassessment,” a term that has a long diplomatic history in the United States. Many Americans, again not solely Democrats, have reached the conclusion that perhaps the U.S.-Saudi relationship that has come to develop over the past seventy-five years is untenable in its current terms. How would your government respond to the argument that it needs a reset, a reassessment, and what would be the terms, in your view, that would be appropriate for that sort of reassessment?

Faisal: I'm here today this week to be part of the strategic dialogue between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the thing that I've seen during that dialogue is that the relationship is still very relevant, very strong. The issues of joint interest and cooperation are extensive. They go far beyond the traditional aspects that we think of—just counterterrorism. There are many more issues where we work together very closely. And we have a strong alignment both in regional policies and in our outlook to the global multilateral order. I think that any assessment that is done of the relationship will find that there is still very significant value for both countries, for both peoples in the relationship, and I am confident that any administration will see the very strong and important value that is in that relationship. And we will work with any administration to further those interests and work together to deliver all the potential that is in this very important relationship.

Satloff: So, if you don't mind me asking, why are we starting a strategic dialogue in the two weeks before an American election, three years after President Trump visited Riyadh?

Faisal: Well, I mean, the strategic dialogue is an institutional dialogue. It's a dialogue with the United States of America, and therefore I think it should be completely devoid of a political context, and that's the way we see it. We see this relationship as long-lasting. It has lasted for seventy-five years. It has gone through a lot in those seventy-five years, but it has continued to deliver strong value, and I think the strategic dialogue we're having today and we had yesterday will show that that value will persist into the future.

Satloff: Let me ask about another domestic issue—another issue that is high on the minds of many viewers of this show but more generally, I think, is also something that has attracted considerable attention on both sides of the aisle in Capitol Hill and in American politics. It is the broader question of human rights issues inside the kingdom. 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. It's very difficult for Americans to understand why these women are still in jail. 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 the reform process that's ongoing in the kingdom has delivered significant

progress in those areas, and I think many people will attest to the fact that, whether it's in judicial reform related to issues like flogging or application of the death penalty, or whether it's related to the overall role of women in society and far beyond—that, you know, the work is ongoing. It is something we do because the leadership believes strongly that it's in the best interest of our country and our people. 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, and if you break the law, you are subject to its precepts. And the prosecutor has said quite clearly that he sees serious crimes, and the courts are independent. They will adjudicate and will take the necessary actions as they see fit, and when will they be released is up to the courts, not to the government.

Satloff: So, is it your view that people around the world who look at these cases and see in them an affront to human rights are mistaken?

Faisal: I think they may not have all the information, and that might be something where we have not been able to explain the case completely. That could be the case, but it's not up to us. It's up to the courts. We have independent courts, and they must adjudicate those charges. As far as how people perceive them, I think that everybody has the right to perceive things as they understand them.

Satloff: I only underscore this because I know how significant the issue is and how it will play a significant role in the development of U.S.-Saudi relations as we go forward. And I urge as much as possible, as strongly as possible, that these cases be concluded. Is there a reason why they're taking so long to reach conclusion?

Faisal: I think that's up to—we'd have to ask the court. I don't have an answer for that. I think the courts take their time, and it's important that they review all the evidence that they are presented with in a fair and deliberate manner, and we hope that they will come to their conclusions soon.

Satloff: Alright, let's move now to some issues of regional politics that were raised in your own opening remarks. You had a pretty tough statement about Iran and Iran's regional troublemaking, so I'd like to ask you about U.S. policy toward Iran. In broad strokes, we've had two U.S. policies over the last decade. First was the Obama administration's focus on nuclear issues, leading to the JCPOA, which you said Saudi Arabia welcomed, which made Iran's other malign activities somewhat of a secondary issue, and which sought a certain balance in regional terms between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Then came the Trump administration's maximum pressure, which saw toughening of sanctions but not the achievement of a better deal with Iran and, other than the killing of [IRGC Qods Force commander] Qasem Soleimani—itsself a significant act—no significant pushback on Iran's malign regional activities, symbolized by the attack on Saudi oil facilities last year, to which there was no direct response. It seems to me perhaps Saudi Arabia isn't pleased with either of these two approaches. Neither one has achieved regional stability, put Iran's nuclear program on hold, enhanced the security of the region. 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. The regime in Iran is less capable in supporting its proxies in Iraq and Lebanon and Syria. It is certainly feeling the pressure domestically. It is certainly constrained and contained more than it was in the past. The problem with the JCPOA, as I think could be understood from your question, was it didn't address any of the malign activities, whether it's their regional ambition and their support of proxies, their undermining of state institutions or the more direct threats of their ballistic missile program and other military programs. And our hope is that Iran will accept to sit down with the global community, led by the U.S. And you know this administration has been willing to sit down with Iran, and we fully support that.

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. Under the JCPOA, we would have an expiration of the arms embargo this month. This really boggles the mind how we came to that conclusion, how we thought that that was reasonable considering everything that was going on at the time, not least the actions in Syria, the ongoing support for Hezbollah, the ongoing support for the Houthis. And the idea that Iran would be in such a short timeframe getting now access to much more sophisticated weaponry, including equipment that they might use to improve the accuracy of their ballistic missiles, et cetera, is really dangerous.

You mentioned pushback. I think the U.S. and others are pushing back—we are pushing back very hard—but, you know, our belief is we don't want a military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran or between us and Iran. It's Iran that occasionally lashes out militarily and seeks confrontation. 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 and other activities. I think the path for peace is open. They just need to take it.

Satloff: So, is it your view that the Trump administration has set the table for an aggressive pursuit of “a better deal, JCPOA-plus-plus”? Has the administration laid out to you its strategy to achieve this “plus-plus” deal?

Faisal: I think so. I think, as we said, if we continue to put significant pressure on Iran, that will force them eventually to come to the table, and I believe that everybody now sees that, without addressing the deficiencies of the original agreement, any future agreement, whether it's called JCPOA, whether it's called something else, will only lay the groundwork for future instability. So, it'll be a temporary salve that will not deliver the security that we need and that we all hope for in the region.

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 are of course very concerned, you know, worried about the Iranians' intentions. We have always been suspicious of their intentions. We supported the JCPOA, but we supported it grudgingly, because we were not involved in its formation or consulted about it, you know, so we hoped that it would deliver the best, while we were very suspicious of the potential. As I said, you know, we had sunset built into that, so we felt very strongly that eventually Iran would be able to rebuild its economic capacity and therefore have a much larger, much more robust resilience toward future sanctions. They would potentially have [broken out] anyway, so 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. We think that they had just put them on the shelf for a temporary period.

Satloff: And just the last question on this. As an observer of Iran, do you think the amount of pressure being imposed on them is close to the point where the Iranians are going to say, “Enough, let's negotiate”? Or is this going to go on for quite some time?

Faisal: It appears to us that they are under significant pressure. How much they can continue to last is, of course, something that is a hypothetical. I can't make a guess, but we hope that they will change their focus; they should focus on delivering peace and prosperity and development for the Iranian people. If they just change that focus, I think everything else will flow from that, and otherwise, unfortunately, the only option and the only viable safeguard for the region is to keep the pressure on.

Satloff: I'd like to turn to another issue that you raised in your talk and that concerned the Arab-Israeli peace process. 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. If we don't manage to achieve that, we will continue to have that festering wound in the region. We are committed to the process of peace. 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. Therefore, we strongly believe that the focus now should be on getting the Palestinians and the Israelis to the table, and I believe, you know, everybody is committed to trying to find a way to achieve that.

Satloff: Is your view that the Emiratis and Bahrainis made that more likely or less likely by the steps that they've taken with Israel?

Faisal: So, 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: Would you welcome other Arab states, if not Saudi Arabia, taking those sorts of steps? That is, moving toward normal relations with Israel in exchange for Israel taking certain measures with the Palestinians?

Faisal: Other states will have to decide what they think is in the best interest of them and the cause that they believe in.

Satloff: Can I ask you about a fascinating set of interviews delivered just recently by Prince Bandar [bin Sultan], who speaks with some authority given his personal experience on these issues. I believe it's fair to say that one can sum up Prince Bandar's interviews with the phrase "The Palestinian cause is just, but Palestinian leaders have failed their people repeatedly." Do you agree with Prince Bandar's opinion?

Faisal: I believe that the Palestinian leaders genuinely want what's best for their people. The important thing is to work with them and the Israelis to get talks going, and that's what we're committed to.

Satloff: I know we only have a few minutes left. There are a couple more big topics that people are flooding my email inbox with. 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: I certainly hope that cooler heads will prevail and find a solution. I believe that we are committed to finding a solution. We are, you know—from the beginning, we've worked with the late emir of Kuwait to find a path forward. 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. We could use this, I think, for stability and security, but we do need to address the legitimate security concerns of the quartet, and I think there is a path toward that, and we are hoping that we can find that in the relatively near future.

Satloff: When do you think we will see this Gulf rift resolved?

Faisal: Your guess is as good as mine.

Satloff: I hope your guess is better than mine. You referenced in your remarks Vision 2030. This has captured quite a bit of attention for some of the dramatic aspirations that the kingdom has identified for reform—economic, social, and other reform—inside the kingdom. Without giving the full brief, what's on target and what's not on target in terms of achieving the objectives here?

Faisal: So, broadly, Vision 2030 is on target. Of course, we have all in the global community been challenged by COVID-19. COVID-19 has put an enormous strain economically, socially, in all contexts on governments around the world. Saudi Arabia has not been immune from that, so that has affected us. Before COVID-19 hit, we were, for instance, on track to record low unemployment among Saudis. That has, of course, now been affected significantly because of the economic impact of COVID-19. But on the positive side, we are among the least affected G20 nations by the downturn caused by the pandemic, so our GDP loss is significantly lower than many of our G20 partners.

There are many things that continue to be on track. For instance, homeownership by Saudis is at record highs. Other deliverables such as women's empowerment, women's participation in the workforce, are, you know, ahead of target, for instance. So, you have some issues there where we are ahead of target. Quality of life issues are progressing very, very strongly. The larger "mega-projects," as they are called, of course, will be later to show their results, but they continue to be on target as far as their development processes, and we have been committed to insulating them as much as possible from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic economically. Broadly, Vision 2030 is on track. It is of course affected by the global economic crisis, as I said, and I think once we are over the severe impacts of the pandemic, we will be able to ramp up very quickly to deliver on the targets that are set. But Vision 2030, by the way, was designed and built to be a flexible vision, in the sense that it should be able to deal very effectively and efficiently with shocks and with surprises, and that's the case. We've been able to reallocate resources as necessary to make sure that those things that are of highest priority are protected and continue to go forward.

Satloff: If I could ask, how has the continuing low price of oil affected all this? My assumption is that the short-term needs for spending to enable these reforms are pretty great but the global economy is not playing along.

Faisal: As I mentioned, all of our economies, you know—we are a global community and all of our economies have been affected by this global pandemic. Saudi Arabia has not been immune and we have, of course, taken a hit. The oil price is not where we—you know, we're not in an ideal place, but we had enough reserves and we had enough borrowing capacity that we were able to not only keep the most

important parts of Vision 2030 on track but also to inject significant stimulus into the domestic economy to make sure that the economy is protected from the worst effects of the pandemic. So, Saudi Arabia is still in a very strong financial position even with all the challenges of the economic downturn, and with the downturn in the oil price. We have a lot of resilience built into the system and we are taking advantage of that now.

Satloff: Okay, we'll just ask one last question. You're heading back to Riyadh. You came here at an extraordinary moment in American politics. Just between the two of us, when your superiors say, "Prince Faisal, tell me where is America today, what did you glean from your time in Washington, your time in America?" What's your report?

Faisal: Between you and me and two thousand of our best friends, I will report that America is a robust democracy going through a very interesting process that bears watching, and you know we will watch it.

Satloff: And those are the words of a foreign minister. Foreign Minister, thank you very much! I appreciate you answering the broad range of questions that I posed, and I look forward to more opportunities to have continuing discussion with you and your colleagues about the direction of U.S.-Saudi relations, so thank you very much for being with us today at The Washington Institute.

Faisal: Thank you so much for the opportunity. I really enjoyed the conversation.