

Remarks

His Excellency Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir

Foreign Minister, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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[VIDEO](#)

Good afternoon everyone, thank you very much for this kind invitation. I see the topic is the Middle East and I would like to offer a more optimistic note than the one we usually read about or hear about.

I believe that our region is a dynamic region, it is a young region. It is an intermediate region, both historically, between ancient Rome and the modern world, as well as geographically, between the Orient and the Occident.

It is a region that has tremendous resources, a lot of young people, which means a lot of energy. It is a region that is increasingly connected to the world; it is a region that has a lot of wealth, a lot of entrepreneurship.

It is a region that sits at the crossroads of civilization between Asia, Africa, and Europe. And so it is a region that by any measure should have the attributes for greatness. It is a region that has historically been connected to the world in every way, from the old Nabataean civilizations, to the civilizations of Egypt and Babylonia, up until the modern age.

The problem, however, is that our region faces many challenges. Challenges of underdevelopment, challenges of extremism, challenges of terrorism, challenges of trying to find its identity in the sense that each country is looking for its own identity. It has gone through tremendous upheavals over the past few years, beginning with the events in Tunis, and then Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and other places.

I believe that the rise in sectarianism and the rise of religious extremism and the rise of terrorism are all our challenges that we all have to deal with; we can't deal with them alone. But I do believe, and I remain convinced and hopeful, that in dealing with those challenges, our region will come out of it in a much better place than it was going into it.

And so I don't want to belabor this point, I want to talk a little bit about Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is a nation of 30 million people, including noncitizens. Saudi Arabia is a nation with a very young population. Saudi Arabia is a nation with tremendous resources, whether minerals, oil, of course.

Saudi Arabia is a nation that has tremendous financial resources, that has first class infrastructure, that has stable government, and geographic location. It has many friends in the world.

Saudi Arabia is a nation that has a history of pragmatism and proportion and balance, in both its internal as well as external policies. And it is a country that, if it has one constant, that constant is change.

We were a tribal nation, we became a modern nation. Within one generation we were able to transform our country in ways that very few other countries were able to do.

Life expectancy rates doubled in one generation, from 37 years to over 70. Infant mortality rates dropped from the level of the least developed countries in the world to the level of European countries in one generation. And the education went from 95 percent illiteracy to 100 percent literacy in one generation. I don't believe that there are many countries in the world that were able to do this.

Women's education, which was nonexistent in 1960, today 55 percent of college students in my country are women. It's unheard of and yet the image of Saudi Arabia is one of an insular country – a country that lives in a different age – because women don't drive.

This issue is an issue that is a cultural issue that our society will deal with on its own terms and in its own ways. But if we look at the overall picture, we are a country that is dynamic and moving forward – a country that evolves in every area.

I mentioned to you the social and the economic changes that have happened in my country. Politically, we are evolving. Our government is institutionalized, we developed government institutions, we developed a legislative branch. 20 percent of the members of our consultative council are women.

We developed human rights organizations and civil society organizations, and this is just the beginning. There is nothing that will prevent us from doing more in terms of our ideology.

We are a country that has no ambitions beyond its borders; we have enough land, people, resources. We are a country that is focused on its internal development and improving the lot of its people.

We are a country that is seeking security, peace, and stability in our area and, by extension, the world. That's who we are and that's what our policies aspire to.

And we have dealt with the challenges in our region this year in ways that the world maybe is not used to. But that's because, frankly, there was a vacuum. And if nobody's willing to do something, then the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its allies had to step in and do something.

We acted in Yemen to prevent a legitimate government from collapsing and from the country being taken over by a radical militia allied with Iran and Hezbollah, which was in possession of heavy weapons, ballistic missiles, and an air force.

We did so in response to the request of the legitimate government. We have no intention of seizing one inch of the Yemeni territory. We have no intention of trying to dominate Yemen. We want to preserve Yemen. Remove the threat to us and our neighbors and help Yemen get back on its feet.

In Syria, we are working to bring about change, political change if possible, to what is happening in Syria to remove a man who is responsible for the murder of 300,000 people, the displacement of 12 million, and the destruction of a nation.

A man who is the single most effective magnet for extremists and terrorist in the region. That's our objective, and we will achieve it.

We're trying to work with other countries in the region, whether it's Egypt, whether it's Iraq, whether it's Sudan, whether it's countries in the Maghreb (North Africa) to try to help them deal with their economic issues as well as deal with extremism and terrorism – and we will succeed.

Again, I have no doubt. We don't have an ideology we're wedded to, we have pragmatism we adhere to and that we pursue our policies by.

So I think when we look at our country, when we look at the region today, the two areas that stand out the most in reading the newspapers is Daesh and Yemen.

I want to say a little bit about Daesh. Daesh is a terrorist organization composed of psychopaths who have no religion and no morals. They attract other psychopaths and it's a cult. And it will be defeated.

But in order to defeat Daesh, we have to deal with what I call the two elephants in the room. One of those elephants is Bashar al Assad.

We cannot defeat Daesh in Syria unless we bring about change in Bashar al Assad. He is the man who helped create it by releasing radicals from his jails, by allowing Daesh to operate without attacking them, by even trading with them.

He is the man that allowed them to become what they are and unless and until there is a change in Syria, Daesh will not be defeated in Syria. Period.

We have an international coalition of which my country was a founding member that has been bombing Daesh in Syria for 15 months and its still around. So when Assad goes, the fertile environment in which Daesh operates in Syria will be removed and we can deal with them.

The second elephant in the room is implementing the reforms that were agreed to in Iraq in 2014 that would bring the Sunni community into the fold that would create an

equitable system between Sunni, Kurd, Shia, and Caledonians – all Iraqis. That also will pull the rug out from under Daesh in Iraq and allow the country and its allies to defeat it. Everything else we do is putting scotch tape on an open wound. We've got to deal with the source of it. Those are the two main sources.

Yemen, I'm more optimistic about because the legitimate government of Yemen is now in control of three quarters of the country.

The humanitarian assistance in the areas that are controlled by the government is flowing effectively. The humanitarian suffering that exists in the Houthi Saleh controlled areas is a consequence of the Houthis and Saleh hijacking their people and starving them, and laying siege on their towns in order to score political gains. But that too will come to an end, it takes time.

We will not stop until the job is finished. Our objective for Yemen is a new Yemen, a stable Yemen, a united Yemen, a Yemen that will be open to reconstruction and development that will then result in a prosperous Yemen that will be a good neighbor to us.

And so with this, I've said enough so maybe I'll stop here and take some questions.

Moderator: Thank you very much Mr. Minister. Again, we are already in overtime, so maybe two short question. Who is the first?

I see someone in the back. Could you identify yourself, please? It's hard to see faces from here because of the lights.

Audience Member: I'm Crispin Blunt [inaudible]...in London. Foreign Minister, I hate to raise another elephant in the room. Both you and the prime minister in Iraq and His Majesty, King Abdullah before, all talked about Daesh being un-Islamic. Isn't, and I'm quoting here from an article in The Atlantic by Graeme Wood, whom you're certainly familiar with: "The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic. Yes, it has attracted psychopaths and adventure seekers, drawn largely from the disaffected populations of the Middle East and Europe. But the religion preached by its most-ardent followers derives from the most coherent, and even learned, interpretations of Islam." And the article obviously goes on to advise us to base our strategy [inaudible]. And I invite you to comment on it.

Foreign Minister: Every religion has perverts and psychopaths who try to hijack it. ISIS is as much Islamic as the KKK is Christian. Don't they have a cross? Don't they do everything in the name of religion and Christ? Don't they believe that Christ compels them to lynch and kill people of African descent? Can one really say that the KKK is a Christian organization? There are other groups that one can point to. There are other massacres that were committed in the name of keeping certain country or regions clear of non-Christians.

There are people like this also in the Jewish faith that have nothing to do with Judaism. There are people like this in the Hindu faith that have nothing to do with Hinduism. For anyone to argue that Daesh is Islamic, is preposterous. In the Islamic faith, the Quran reveals that: you have your faith and I have my faith. And you're free to practice your faith and I'm free to practice mine. What greater sign of tolerance and acceptance do you have than this? In the Islamic faith it says, he who kills an innocent soul is as if he has killed all of humanity. And he who saves an innocent soul, is as if he saved all of humanity. What more, what better example of compassion and mercy do you have than this? So if you look at what Daesh says and you say it's in the scriptures, doesn't The Old Testament say "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?" If somebody does that today, would you say they were Christian or Jewish?

So, I caution people, because it seems to have become almost novel, not novel, it's become the flavor of the day. To try to read things into Daesh, or into Islam, that are not there. The Islamic religion and Islamic civilization, was the civilization that preserved the history of Greek and Rome and passed it on to the West. Western civilization would not exist without the Islamic Arab civilization. The Islamic civilization and the Islamic Arab civilization was the civilization that connected China with Europe. So it was global. The point I made earlier on, about being an intermediate civilization, this is what I mean. So if Islam was intolerant and Daesh represented Islam, would Islam have preserved Aristotle and Socrates, and passed it on to the West? Would Islam have connected Eastern Civilization with Western Civilization? Of course not.

So I urge you, all of you, to be careful when it comes to making generalizations, or to accepting generalizations that have no basis in fact. Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you. Final question. Is that Ann-Marie Slaughter?

Audience Member: Hi, Anne-Marie Slaughter. The President of New America. Thank you very much for addressing the issue of women in your country. I think you are right to see that this is an increasing issue for many in the world. And that it should be addressed openly. I just wanted to make sure I heard you correctly. Because what I heard you say, was that there is nothing in your culture that prohibits, or retards, the advancement of women. Did I hear that right?

Foreign Minister: What I was saying is that, in our faith, when it comes to some of the issues like women driving, that this is not a religious issue, this is a societal issue. When it comes to issues like education, this is not religious issue, this was a societal issue. But we dealt with it. And we went from no schools for women in 1960, to universal education, to where today, 55 percent of college students in Saudi Arabia are women. I can give you another statistic, but it would embarrass me as a Saudi male. More than 60 percent of graduate students in Saudi Arabia are women. Some of our top doctors and engineers and lawyers and businesspeople are women. So the opportunities are there.

It's not... the, the issue is one that is evolving, just like it is evolving in other countries. America, one of the world's great democracies, gained its independence – my

mathematics is not very good – 220 years ago, 1776, 250 years ago almost. It took 100 years before women were given the right to vote. It took another 100 years before a women was elected Speaker of the House. I'm not saying give us 200 years. I'm just saying be patient. And when it comes to societal change, in every society people tend to look at where they are now and they think everybody should be with us. Again I will quote America, maybe because I spent so much of my life there. America was independent in 1776. The Republic was founded, what, two decades later? It took almost 80 years before slavery was abolished. It took 100 years before there was a civil rights movement. And it took another three decades before you had, before you had real racial equality in America.

Things take time. Now you hope that in the modern world with technology and with communications, this process is accelerated. But it takes time. And we must acknowledge this and accept this. We can't expect to rush things over night, otherwise we wouldn't be who we are.

Moderator: Thank you so much Mr. Minister. Let's give a hand to the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia. And I certainly hope to be able to welcome you back next year. You should consider this a standing invitation from now on. Thank you very much.

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