For a member of the Saudi royal family, Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud has spent much of his life outside of Saudi Arabia. At fourteen years old, he left his native Mecca to attend the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. He then moved to Washington, D.C., where he received a bachelor’s degree from Georgetown University in 1968. Forty years later, Prince Turki was called upon to put his experience with American culture and politics to work when, in 2005, he was appointed by King Abdullah to serve as the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, a position he held for over a year.

Before entering into diplomacy, Prince Turki forged a career in politics and public service. While at Georgetown, a Jesuit Catholic university, he organized a campus-wide conference on Islam during his freshman year. After his graduation, he went on to study Islamic law and jurisprudence in post-graduate
programs at Cambridge University and the University of London. In 1973, Prince Turki returned to Saudi Arabia, where he began working as an Advisor in the Royal Court in Riyadh.

In 1977, Prince Turki began working for the General Intelligence Directorate, Saudi Arabia’s main foreign intelligence arm. After serving briefly as deputy to Kamal Adham, Prince Turki stepped into his primary role as director general, a position he held for 23 years. After leaving the General Intelligence Directorate in September of 2001, Prince Turki moved to London to serve as the Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom, where he remained until 2008.

Prince Turki returned to Washington, D.C., in July of 2005. In his role as ambassador, he presented his credentials to both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and President George W. Bush. While in America, Prince Turki traveled extensively, visiting 17 states and working to foster positive relationships between the United States and the Middle East.

Today, Prince Turki serves Saudi Arabia in a variety of capacities. Foremost among them is his position as founder of the King Faisal Foundation. In keeping with his passion for education, he sits as chairman of the foundation’s Center for Research and Islamic Studies as an advocate of education investment in Saudi Arabia. For the past several years, he has also worked as a visiting professor at Georgetown University, visiting the United States frequently to lecture and travel.

Let’s talk about Saudi Arabia. What do you think are the most pressing domestic issues that Saudi Arabia faces at the moment?

Prince Turki: Well, Saudi Arabia has a lot of development issues. The Kingdom is a country of recent history, in terms of identity: in 1932 it became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and at that time there were very few natural resources, let alone human resources. With the discovery of oil in 1935, the Kingdom began to develop. And since then, it’s been a race for time, how quickly the government can implement development in terms of infrastructure, services, hospitalization, education, housing, roads, airports, and so on. We’re still doing that, because we have a growing population, since the availability of financial resources coming from the oil allowed us to maintain a habitable environment for the population. Historically, the Arabian Peninsula, since the last Ice Age, has never held a large population because of the lack of resources: no rivers, very few other water resources, underground or otherwise. People simply moved from the Peninsula outwards to the more fertile valleys of Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley in India. For the first time in the history of Arabia, since the coming of the oil industry, that migration has been reversed. So we’re trying to catch up not only with a growing population, but with the people who are coming in to help with our development projects.

Lack of human resources was one of the main challenges for the Kingdom and still is, so education became a primary objective and concern of the government. It’s expanding exponentially, not just in the level of primary, secondary, and high school, but also the university. One of the main accomplishments, I think, of the Kingdom, has been the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which has expanded from the first few years of nearly 2,000 students with scholarships sent all over the world to now maybe 150,000 Saudi students. In this country alone, there are close to 70,000. There are a lot of Saudi students, both male and female, and so that is one challenge, the youth, and how to provide them with the skills and know-how to find their jobs and livelihoods, whether in the Kingdom or otherwise. Practically all Saudi students, in my experience—I was student on scholarship as well—I have returned after they have finished their college education, so that is one positive factor in our favor, that having learned their skills and know-how, they go back to help in that development.

That is one of the internal issues. The other, of course, is the role of women in Saudi Arabia. As I mentioned to you, men and women share in our education system equally. I’ll rephrase that—the women surpass the men in their scholastic accomplishment, and I think that reversal is not only common in Saudi Arabia. The number of female graduates from universities exceeds that of male graduates, and their scholastic achievement is high. Finding jobs for women, who graduate with these skills has been a social challenge for us. Because the government has decreed that all opportunities for women are open, it’s a matter of how a young lady will convince her parents or her husband—whoever is responsible, with her, for her. And the other is to go out and work. I think the percentage of women in the labor force is between 15 and 20 percent, which is pretty low, but it is much better than it was ten years ago, when it was five percent. And the biggest employer is the government, in health services, in education, in the social services, because of the necessary engagement with families and with other women in those fields. But this is another challenge that we have to pursue progress in. Two years ago, the king named women to the Shura council, which is our parliament. And the year before that, women were enfranchised not only to vote in elections but also to be candidates for elections, so in that aspect, there has been much progress as compared to a few years back.

Can you tell us about your time as ambassador to America and how the dynamic between Saudi Arabia and the United States has changed since then?

Prince Turki: The two countries have had a longstanding relationship. King Abdullah, our founder, met in 1945 with your president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, on an American ship in the middle of the Bitter Lake, near Suez. We’ve had, since that time, a very strategic relationship. Like all friends, we have our agreements, and we have our disagreements. As an ambassador, I was actually here for a very short time, one year and four months, but it was an important time because it was post-September 11, 2001. When I came here in September 2005, the Iraq War had already been going on for at least two years, and things were very unsettled. There was much blood being shed there. The relationship between the two countries began to improve after September 11, so it was not a time really to sit back and relax for a representative of the Kingdom and King Abdullah in Washington. It was at that time that there was a new exercise in the relationship, which was the establishment of the so-called “strategic dialogue” between the two countries. In April 2005, when King Abdullah visited Mr. Bush in Crawford, Texas, they agreed to set up this dialogue, which was led by the foreign secretaries in both countries, and was supposed to meet twice a year: once in Washington, once in Saudi Arabia. It was headed by the foreign ministers, but the other ministers were involved, and even some businessmen and nongovernmental groups met under the umbrella of this strategic dialogue. During my time here, though it was short, I had at least two or three of these meetings. In 2006, a year after I came here, the major event was the Israeli attack on Lebanon. When Hizbollah kidnapped two or three Israeli soldiers, Israel unleashed its military might against Lebanon. It took a great deal of effort on the part of Saudi Arabia and other countries, including the United States, to try to bring a stop to that. The Palestinian issue was also gathering
“We still continue to talk with the United States, and coordinate with the United States, but we differ on the tactics.”

momentum under President Bush, and he had, the year before, I think, issued what was then called the “roadmap to peace,” which was agreed on by America, the European Union, the Russian Federation, and the United Nations as the way to establish a two-state agreement between Israel and Palestine. That also was one of the things I worked on with the administration. At the end of 2005, Mr. Bush and his foreign secretary, Ms. Rice, insisted that the President of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, must hold elections for a parliament. There was much discussion then. Mr. Abbas felt he had been pushed into it, and in his party would lose and Hamas would become the government. And Hamas had already been declared by the U.S. government as a terrorist group, so the U.S. then would stop all contact with the government of Palestine. Unfortunately, the American administration persisted in pushing Abbas to hold elections. Sure enough, when the elections were held, Hamas won a majority in the government, and immediately the United States declared that they were not going to deal with that government. Subsequent to that, there was a split between Fatah and Hamas, which complicated matters. America, with the Kingdom, had a lot of disputes on these issues. Even though my time was short here, it was still fully occupied by these things.

At that time, the issue of Iranian nuclear ambitions was very much in Mr. Bush’s mind. He had views of perhaps using armed might to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Nothing came of that, of course, but nonetheless, that subject was very much in the news. The Kingdom’s position on that issue was that any armed conflict of that nature would have led to worse consequences. We prefer to go the route of establishing a realm free of weapons of mass destruction where everybody could be on equal ground. You can be sure that you are going to end any possibility of proliferation if you can have an area free of weapons of mass destruction. Of course, you have to fix the issues on the ground, like the Arab-Israeli dispute, and you have to fix the issue of Iran’s ambitions on the other side. But for the Kingdom, that still remains a preferable way to go than the unilateral way that the P5+1 is dealing with Iran and any other potential developer of nuclear enrichment.

What are, in your opinion, the key differences between the United States and Saudi Arabia within the international community?

Prince Turki: One of our key differences is over the issue of Middle East peace, the Palestine issue. It’s not a disagreement on what the aims are, because both of us want peace. Both of us want a two-state solution, both of us want an end of hostilities. The differences are mostly on how to get there. From Saudi Arabia’s point of view, the King Abdullah Peace Plan that was presented in 2002 is the equitable way of achieving peace between Israel and the Arab world. It calls for Arab recognition of Israel, normalization of relations, and an end of hostilities in return for Israeli withdrawal from all the Arab countries that they occupied during 1967, including East Jerusalem, and a settling of the refugee problem by mutual agreement. That’s a difference. We still continue to talk with the United States, and coordinate with the United States, but we differ on the tactics.

Another disagreement that we have with the United States, presently, is on the issue of fighting ISIS. We agree on fighting ISIS itself, but we believe that ISIS is a symptom of a disease, and that dealing with ISIS is dealing with the symptom. The disease is in Damascus. You have to fix Damascus in order to be able to meet the challenge of ISIS, as is happening now in Baghdad. Everybody in Baghdad saw how ISIS rushed through certain areas, to Mosul and other places, and all of a sudden discovered that the problem there was really the prime minister, because of the way he was mishandling his leadership of Iraq. The world community got together, convinced the Iraqi political parties that they must replace Mr. Maliki, which they did, and install a government which would be a national unity government, which they are doing. And that is the way to meet the threat of ISIS in Iraq. Equally so, in our view, should be the situation in Syria. But the president is not yet convinced that removing Mr. Assad is going to be a solution, while we think that it is. That is another issue that we have with Mr. Obama.

You spoke about women’s rights earlier. Can you talk about the driving campaign? Specifically in the last couple weeks [late October 2014] there was a petition...

Prince Turki: Women would get out and drive. I don’t know what happened, because I was in Washington, but I didn’t see much reflection in the press about whether women did or did not respond to that call by the so-called activist element. I had a question yesterday in one of my classes in Georgetown about women driving, and I said that I am all for it, and I don’t understand why there has not been a government agreement on that issue, because it doesn’t make sense. If you look back on all of the women’s rights issues, historic and otherwise, how can you have a woman be a member of parliament, and elected to be a minister on a council, and representing the electorate, and participating in the elections, and so on, and now have the right to drive? Previously, I read and even heard from our late interior minister, the late Prince Nayef, about this issue. The year before he died, he was asked about it, and he said, “It’s not a political issue. It’s a social issue, which time will heal by itself.” But I think the government should be in the forefront of giving women the right to drive, simply by letting them go and get a license like everybody does. Unfortunately, it hasn’t happened yet.

We also wanted to ask about the economy. You talked about how development is such a crucial issue for Saudi Arabia. How do you think the recent drop in oil prices will affect the Saudi economy?

Prince Turki: It will inevitably, and it’s not just Saudi Arabia that will be affected. The whole market will be unstable, which will be very curious. In the past, whenever you had armed conflict in the area, you always had a spike in the oil prices. Yet,
today, we see war in Syria, war in Iraq, and no spiking in the price of oil simply because there is too much production. It is not just because of America’s shale oil boom that that is the case. Everyone is producing more than the market can stand. Obviously, the European’s slow economy has kept their consumption lower than was expected, and Saudi Arabia is merely trying to protect its share of the market by competing with others in the same market because, if we cut production, others will immediately take our customers, and that is not a fair proposition. Within OPEC, there is going to be a meeting in a few days’ time [November 2014]. I’m sure they’ll discuss all of these things and try to find a way out. You heard a lot of speculation, particularly in the American press, on where Saudi Arabia stands: whether it is a war against shale oil or a war against Iran, a war against Russia, etc. It’s really market forces coming to the fore and each country protecting its turf. Something will come out of the OPEC agreement. I think that will help everybody agree on a reasonable price and a reasonable quota of production for not just the OPEC members but also the non-OPEC members, like Russia and West Africa.

**Do these price drops force Saudi Arabia to look at different economic opportunities besides petroleum?**

**Prince Turki:** We’ve been doing that for the last ten years, because as our development grows and our population grows, we are consuming more of our own production. We’d rather sell it to other people and get money for it. So the Kingdom has set up a department for nuclear and renewable energy. They published a study of Saudi needs, and how these nuclear and other renewable energies can supply the Saudi consumption with their energy output. By 2050, we should have at least 35% of our own consumption coming from these other sources of energy. We have to produce more non-oil energy sources, so that we can benefit more from our oil by selling it or by putting it in a refinery and getting products like all of these new carbon-based plastic products that are coming into the fore.

While you were the Director of General Intelligence, what was the greatest challenge that you faced? And what are some of the greatest threats that Saudi Arabia faces today?

**Prince Turki:** The East-West confrontation, communism vs. capitalism, had ended in 1991 with the breakup of the Soviet Union, so the world changed direction and changed focus from East-West confrontation, which occupied most of my time as Director of Intelligence from 1977, when I became Director of Intelligence, until the Soviet Union fell. It became, for a short while, what was given the name of a “unipolar world” with the U.S. being the primary power, until U.S. involvement in both Afghanistan and Iraq abated that presumption, on the part not just of the United States but the rest of us. After that, of course, came terrorism. 2001 was the second stage in the al-Qaeda terrorist campaign. The first stage was addressed at Saudi Arabia six years before. 1995 was the first time that al-Qaeda undertook a terrorist act, and it was in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. There followed other terrorist acts, or attempts at terrorist acts, in the Kingdom. The Kingdom was very much a target of the bloody group from the beginning, and still remain a target for them. Terrorism became the catchword in all intelligence agencies, and I think even now, since I retired from intelligence work, terrorism remains probably the main threat to stability and security, not just in the Middle East but worldwide. If you look at the people who are operating within ISIS, they come from everywhere: from the United States, from Europe, from Russia, from China, from Saudi Arabia, etc.

The world has to be on the same plane in order to meet that challenge. King Abdullah, in 2005, proposed the establishment of an international center for counterterrorism at the United Nations. Alas, from 2005 until 2012, nothing was done about that center. In 2012, finally the United Nations got around to it and accepted to establish the center, with the support of the world community. But that center has not yet begun to operate, and I think that’s a pity because many countries in the world today either don’t have the human resources, the economic resources, or the resources of training to be able to meet the challenge of terrorist groups, whether it is in sub-Saharan Africa—we’ve seen what happened in Mali, Niger, and Guinea—and in other places like Somalia, Kenya, and so on. We’re seeing what is happening in Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and other places. And if we do not deal with them collectively, we won’t be able to face them. So that center, I think, should be made operational as quickly as possible, and I hope that is something that all governments are working for.

We can’t thank you enough for your time. Thank you very much.

**Prince Turki:** Whatever I can do. Anytime.