

Interview with H.R.H. Prince Saud Bin Naif Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud

Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Spain

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WF: I would like to start by your considerations on the relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Spain.

H.R.H: It is a very good and close relation. In the last years we have both engaged in active diplomacy in so many fields and successfully launched and signed agreements that really set the stage for the fruitful relation that we always enjoyed. The framework that guide this relation in so many fields such as political, military and security, education, culture, economy, and we have now over ten agreements signed that govern our relationship. I must say that this has been a very fruitful experience; we had three very important visits from both Kings in the two capitals, one more visit from the Crown Prince to Spain.

WF: The Alliance of Civilization is an important initiative launched by President Zapatero to close the gap between the Muslim and Western World. Saudi Arabia is known for being a traditional country that places emphasis on its own culture and way of doing things. How does Saudi project itself internationally?

H.R.H: I might add to that that we have welcomed and actively engaged in the dialogue of civilization from day one. In the same path last year we held a dialogue between religions launched by His Majesty the Custody of the two Holy Mosques, and the conference was held here in Madrid. So it is not only that we have one initiative but instead we have more from both sides. Our initiatives are aimed at closing the gaps between cultures, religions, human beings and the value of humanity in spite of the differences that exist.

WF: The excellent relations of Saudi Arabia with the West, including the US and Europe show that this is possible. Perhaps the common interests that you share are more important.

H.R.H: There will always be difference although differences are healthy. We can have different opinions but this doesn't mean that we disagree with the other party. Differences aren't a negative thing in fact they can help finding the best solutions.

WF: I remember talking with the Minister of Information in Kuwait and he stated that the negotiations between the Gulf States and the EU were at the point whereby the Arab World



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could not give any further concession and that after many years of this negotiation you really expected the EU to be ready to finalize the agreement. What are your views and the position of the Saudi government? Is the dialogue re-starting this year?

H.R.H: Not really. This is an economical partnership and it should be treated as an economical agreement between the EU and Gulf States. So you cannot add things every now and then. Every time we are close to reach an agreement there is one or more additions that has nothing to do with the economical issue. We are really to discuss any issue that has to do with the specific agreement but when you add political and other matters then this is not a trade agreement; it is a general agreement that of course has its own agenda and specifics. So either is an economical agreement and then we deal as such but we cannot mix it. The delay is not from our side, we have been negotiating for almost 20 years and 20 years is too long for an economical issue. We have stated our position very clearly and that we are not prepared to discuss this matter in other terms.

WF: The King of Saudi Arabia has been implementing a number of important reforms, including the post of a Minister for a woman. What is the direction and to what extent is Saudi changing or preserving culture and tradition while modernizing?

H.R.H: We are going with steady steps and we are observing the social fabric not to be harmed. Having said that whether is modernization or changes we have to go with certain speed that won't distress society. We cannot only introduce things and then disturb the fabric of our society. We need to move with the speed that is required to be accepted and absorbed by society, and this is why our King is doing it but doing it step by step, coinciding with the same development of our society. If we talk about the woman issue for example, now if we look at the percentage in education in Saudi Arabia, the number of woman with qualifications is higher than then men. So it is not really introducing women since they have been part of the society already, but now we have qualified women in all fields so now they are in the stage where they can get higher posts, and this is why now they are getting higher posts.

WF: Saudi Arabia is known for oil and still has plenty, yet the government invested in the diversification of a solely oil-exporting economy to an industrial and service economy. So what is the economic outlook today and where is it heading?

H.R.H: Long ago we have diversified our economy not to be totally dependent on oil. I cannot say that oil is not the major source of income and product in our economy but we have diversified in industrial, agriculture and other economic platforms. When the economic crisis hit the world we decided to continue with our own program that is self-funded and even in bad times we can actually do projects at a more competitive price. We are taking advantage of cheaper commodities prices for example.

WF: Some people argue that the economy of Saudi Arabia is relative close, at least certain sectors. Would you agree or disagree?

H.R.H: Of course I disagree. Our economy has been opened even in the energy sector; as a matter of fact we have a Spanish company that almost five years ago signed an exploration contract for gas in Saudi Arabia. Therefore it is not true. We have the investment authority that really encourages foreign investments to come to Saudi Arabia. Maybe some people have other offers in other areas around us, maybe.

WF: So how interesting is the investment climate in Saudi Arabia?

H.R.H: Saudi Arabia is almost five times the size of Spain, it is a big country. Investments in our country are not concentrated in a small piece of land so investment can take a little more considering the size. We also have a big population. If you go to the site of the investment authority

you will realize there are many opportunities for investment that will be very attractive for so many companies.

WF: With regards to Spain you have mentioned a company investing in Gas exploration. Yet how active is the Spanish business community in Saudi Arabia from the information that you have?

H.R.H: Well it is more interested than it used to be. We are seeing more companies going both ways. Classically Spanish companies have been more engaged in South America or northern Africa and didn't pay much attention to the Gulf and Far East. But I think that they now recognize we are an area of growth, even in this hard time.

WF: Saudi Arabia remains a relative unfamiliar environment for Spanish companies. As Ambassador of Saudi Arabia here in Spain and with the knowledge of Spain that you have, what would be your advice to them?

H.R.H: We are welcoming any business to go and explore. We will facilitate their voyage to the kingdom and we believe that in the next decade the economy will be slow in other parts of the world while in the Gulf will grow more and remain interesting. There is much work to be done, we are pursuing our programs vigorously and we are not stopping doing what we believe should be done, to stimulate our economy by reinvesting in our country.

WF: If we look at 2009, what are the priorities of the government of Saudi Arabia with regards to Spain? What would you like to accomplish?

H.R.H: I would like to see more Spanish companies engaging with us in the development of Saudi Arabia. With regards to the "hot issues" of the world we are more or less going to the same direction, there is total agreement in certain issues of foreign policy. The economical issue is important since it is a period that will hardly be as attractive as it is now. So I want to encourage both ways investments and economic ties.

WF: You mentioned vice versa. What is the level of Saudi investments then in Spain?

H.R.H: It makes perfect sense to have Saudi Arabia and Spain as natural hubs. From Saudi Arabia within three hours flight you will be covering more than four hundred million people and therefore opens a huge market. Vis-à-vis Madrid is also well located for Europe and North Africa, and it has excellent links with South America. So I see perfect harmony in these two hubs, for example Madrid and Riyadh. Both countries can benefit out of the strategic position and good relations we both have.