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“Geopolitical Upheavals in the Middle East: A Saudi Perspective”

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– the spoken word shall prevail –

In the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate
May God’s Peace and Blessing be upon you.

I extend my thanks to his Excellency Dr. Klaus Wehmeier and Dr. Thomas Paulsen of Körber-Stiftung for their kind invitation to speak to such a distinguished audience.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I've been asked to speak on geopolitical upheavals in the Middle East, a topic that is broad and important in light of the nature of the transformation taking place at the regional and the international levels.

As you know the Middle East includes many countries which are different from each other due to certain historical circumstances. The political, economic, and social history varies from one country to another in the region, despite the shared factors, such as language, religion, and history. Many states in the region originated or were created as a result of colonial legacy or certain international arrangements. As a result, different political cultures and systems were installed. The political elites that inherited the colonial political systems chose different paths to their countries’ political development. Luck was not on the side of many of these new states. They did not have the space to settle on a particular political system. Some had “revolutions” and some had military coups, and therefore entered a state of continuous instability.

Each new political elite in these countries adopted political systems according to their intellectual and ideological proclivities. They, therefore, did not allow their countries to achieve normal political development that responds to the aspirations of the people and bring the required stability to achieve economic, social, cultural, and scientific development. In light of this failure to achieve a real and natural political process, instability continued as a norm in these coun-

tries. What has been happening in the last three years is the shedding of the post-colonial era mantle and the search for a new paradigm that emanates and reflects the aspirations of the people and achieves a genuine stability and security in the region.

In Tunis, the first stop of the revolutionary train that sped through several countries in the Middle East, the process of political give and take is still changing. The Al Nahda party, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood won a plurality in the last elections. But the results are still contested by other political players and the on and off effort to reconcile their differences has not been resolved. Meanwhile, the economic situation is worse than it was under bin Ali and sporadic violence erupts in the form of political assassinations, brigandage, and widespread demonstrations calling for the resignation of the government.

In Egypt, the second stop of that speeding train, the situation is no better, and some would consider it worse. The Muslim Brotherhood, having first declared that it will contest only 20 percent of the parliamentary seats and will not nominate a presidential candidate went ahead and abrogated that promise. They won 40 percent of the seats in parliament and the presidency. Saudi Arabia extended an economic package of four billion dollars to help stabilize the economy. However, the Muslim Brotherhood, having become the ruling party sped on to mismanage all of their conduct by ramming through a constitution, which, when it was contested by the other parties, the president issued a presidential decree assuming sole authority, by attacking the judiciary, by ignoring all the other parties in Egypt, by not offering any economic measures to alleviate the hunger and poverty of the people, and, finally, by not agreeing with the wishes of the millions and millions of Egyptians who came out in the streets of all the cities of Egypt and demanded a referendum on the viability of the president.

Those same millions came out in the streets, again, and demanded that the army remove the president; which it promptly did. The army has instituted a road map for a return to parliamentary and presidential elections and a revision of the constitution. They also proceeded to crack down on the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, who are now in jail awaiting trial for a long list of criminal charges that will keep them incarcerated for a long time. An armed insurgency by the Brotherhood has begun and no one can say when it will end. Saudi Arabia has extended another economic package of five billion dollars to help the Egyptian people face the dire economic situation there.

In Yemen, civil war erupted and several contesting parties are striving for ascendance. The splinter Zeidi sect of al Houthis is trying to dominate the northern part of Yemen and actually crossed into Saudi Arabia, two years ago, attacking Saudi villages along the border. They were repulsed by the Saudi armed forces and suffered heavy losses. They are now fighting against

Sunni salafis for dominance around the city of Saada. In the south, a southern insurgency is actively seeking to secede from the north, and al Qaida continues to inflict terrorism on the Yemeni people.

The Kingdom, along with other GCC countries, have engineered a political process whereby the then president stepped down and his vice president became interim president and formed a national unity government which is holding a national dialogue and attempting to write a constitution in order to hold parliamentary and presidential elections, next year. The Kingdom has extended a large economic package to help in alleviating the poverty of the people.

In Bahrain, the Shi'i political groups and party began a civil disobedience campaign and some of them actually called for the overthrow of the King and turning Bahrain into an Islamic republic, à la Iran. Mayhem and destruction ensued and the government called on its GCC partners to help in protecting the vital infrastructure installations; like the airport, the sea port, the oil refinery, and the business district. Saudi National Guard companies, along with a police contingent from the United Arab Emirates were dispatched to do that and not one of them has participated in arresting or engaging Bahraini citizens. The King of Bahrain invited an independent commission to propose ideas on how to overcome this situation and he publicly committed the Bahraini government to implementing the commission's recommendations. Saudi Arabia has supported the King's call for negotiations and the dialogue is continuing.

In Syria, the biggest tragedy on the route of the revolutionary train is taking place, in front of our eyes. No one, Ladies and Gentlemen, is bothering to put a stop to it. While the people of Syria are seeking to defend themselves against their government's lethal onslaught, without the defensive weapons that they need to do that, Bashar al Assad is killing them by the thousands using the lethal weaponry supplied to him by Russia and the men and advice and equally murderous weapons given to him by Iran. While the world is celebrating the removal of chemical weapons from Syria, the number of Assad's victims has gone beyond a 150 000 victims. And while the festering wound of Syria continues to collect the worst bacteria in the form of terrorist groups from all over the world, the leaders of the world are continuing to ignore the Syrian people who lose 100 deaths every day. The UN Security Council has failed in its duty, thanks to the veto power of Russia and China.

From the beginning of the Syrian tragedy, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has pursued a political solution; first by calling on Bashar to adhere to his people's wishes; then by taking the issue to the Arab League, where, and after repeated attempts to convince him to listen to reason, without success, the League kicked out his representative and gave Syria's seat to the Syrian people's legitimate representatives, the Syrian Coalition. After that, Saudi Arabia, with the League

countries, took the issue up to the Security Council, where an interim government, à la Yemen was proposed, with full authority to rule in Syria; but, Russia and China callously vetoed it. Now, Geneva 2 is proposed to implement what was agreed to in Geneva 1. How can Russia, which still continues to provide Assad with the means to kill his people, be an arbiter on Syria is a historic irony that will puzzle historians for years to come?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenge of Iran's policy behavior and its revolutionary syndrome is a continuing security concern. There are important issues with Iran – its scheme to acquire nuclear weapons, its occupation of the three islands belonging to the UAE, and its persistent meddling in the affairs of Arab states.

As for the issue of nuclear weapons, we continue to insist that Iran should come clean on its suspicious activities and adhere to the Security Council's resolutions and the IAEA demands, support the creation of a Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East, and abide by all the requirements and obligations under the NPT regime. What was achieved in Geneva was welcomed by the Saudi government as an interim stage and we seek a permanent one. Our applause will be offered when all nuclear weapons are removed from the Middle East, including the ones in Israel. No one is paying attention to that. We shall withhold judgment until we see the final stage. Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, proliferation will become the norm.

Engaging with Iran has never been an obstacle for Saudi Arabia. Whereas King Abdallah publicly admonished former President Ahmadinajad for interfering in Arab affairs, the King also publicly welcomed the election of President Rouhani.

However, we do not see this issue as a regional one only but an international issue. Whatever the outcome, we will not tolerate any understanding reached at our expense or against our interests.

On the second issue – that of Iran's occupation of the Emirati islands, we support the UAE's position and have urged Iran to accept a ruling from the International Court of Justice.

On the third issue – that of Iran's inserting itself into the domestic politics of Arab countries – there can be no flexibility. Sectarianizing our region is no less threatening and destructive than nuclear weapons. And here I say that I was glad to hear Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif saying in a BBC interview, recently, that conflict between Sunnis and Shi'is repre-

sents “the most serious security threat, not only at the level of the region, but also at the level of the whole world”. His interview in the Saudi newspaper, Al Sharq Al Awsat, four days ago did not reassure us as to Iran’s good intentions. It did not mention Iran’s inexplicable and murderous support for Assad and against the people of Syria. These statements should make Iran look in the mirror and see its foreign behavior since 1979 to judge who is behind igniting such destructive trends. A thesis begets its antithesis; therefore, Iran must rethink its Arab policies. Funding non-state sectarian entities in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, and renting Islands from Eritria to train Shi’a youth and send them back to their countries to destabilize their national unity and social fabric does not serve anyone’s interests.

Saudi Arabia looks at Iran and considers what is to come, and we can only hope that the people of that nation will encourage their leaders to take a wiser and safer route than the one they now seem bent upon travelling, much to the detriment of themselves and others. Destabilizing neighbors is not a guarantee of regional dominance and influence. It is a recipe for self-defeat. The grand project of Pax Iranica is doomed if it is based on sectarianism and hegemony.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Whatever the geopolitical changes in the region may be, they will never change the nature of the looming challenge of far longer gestation – a situation that lays at the center of so many difficulties faced by our region, namely, the plight of the Palestinian people. Solving the Palestinian and Arab Israeli conflict is imperative to a peaceful region. The daily harassment of Palestinians as they cross the hundreds of check points, the demolition of Palestinian homes, the arbitrary arrests of Palestinians without due process, the uprooting of olive trees, and the continuing theft of Palestinian lands is a tragic reflection of the world’s failure to recognize the right of Palestinians to a viable and contiguous state as spelled out in the Arab Peace Initiative which King Abdallah proposed in 2002. The responsibility for continued failure in reaching a just solution to this just cause rests squarely on Israel and its supporters in the world. The world should have extended political recognition to Palestine since 1988, when the PLO publicly accepted resolution 181 of the General Assembly in 1948, establishing the two states of Palestine and Israel. It is not too late. The European Union should extend that recognition, now. In that context, let us hope that Mr. Kerry’s efforts are crowned by success.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Saudi Arabia is a major actor in regional and international affairs and the security and stability of the regional order has always been a priority and a basic determinant of its foreign policy and its national security. This is a big challenge in our conflict-cursed region.

Since the unification of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the Kingdom has followed a set of guiding principles for its foreign policy.

First, The Kingdom is the birth place of Islam and the custodian of its two holy cities and is obligated to serve the interests of Muslims worldwide. Saudi Arabia is also the heartland of the Arab world and will work to enhance Arab interests in all fields.

Second, Saudi Arabia believes in the concept that the legitimacy of any government is derived from its own people. It is the duty of any government to protect and promote the rights, dignity, safety and welfare of its citizens. Saudi Arabia had and will support developments that make governments more responsive to the demands of their people, and more able to meet their aspirations.

Third, Saudi Arabia stands against any civil strife or external interventions that threaten the national unity, territorial integrity, and the social fabric of any Arab country. Anarchy, chaos and disorder are not in the interest of the people. In this respect our only interest is that countries that have witnessed dramatic changes begin to stabilize and proceed to a brighter future.

Fourth, we believe that transnational ideologies whatever their connotations that do not recognize and admit the existing nation-state system constitute a major threat to the national and regional order, and therefore, Saudi Arabia stands against such trends.

Fifth, we believe strongly in the importance of having the best possible bilateral relations with all Arab countries on the basis of mutual respect and working through regional multinational institutions such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the United Nations on common issues in order to preserve stability and security, worldwide.

Sixth, Saudi Arabia believes in international law and international treaties and conventions, and in the role of international bodies in implementing such rules and norms in order to preserve regional and international peace, and therefore it complies and respects such rules and institutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

No threat is more dangerous than the absence and lack of world leadership in international and regional security and stability. No region is more threatened by this than the Middle East. Therefore, calling for restructuring the world order is a legitimate and pressing call. Reforming

the UN system, which is a metaphor of the waning international order, has been on the agenda of the international community since the early nineties of the last century. Alas, all calls fell on deaf ears despite the continuing talk of the need for such restructuring to reflect the new realities of the world. In this context I recall what the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, stated two years ago in light of the Syrian crisis. He said, and I quote: “The confidence in the UN is shaken and no state, no matter how powerful, can control the world, never, but by reason, ethics, and equity.” End of quote.

The cold war ended with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 and bipolarity transformed into unipolarity where the United States solely enjoyed almost all political, economic, military, and cultural influence on the world stage. The world was hopeful that such a grand transformation in the international order would lead to a more equitable international order which reflects the principles that the US was preaching during the cold war: Rule of Law, Self-determination, Human Rights, and Democracy. This hope was consolidated by freeing Kuwait from occupation and afterwards by the announcement of President George Bush in 1991 that and I quote: “Until now, the world we’ve known has been a world divided – a world of barbed wire and concrete blocks, conflict and cold war. Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order.”

This could have been the ideal for the international community that was becoming more global, more interdependent, more interlinked. This hope, regardless of all intellectual discourses, was dashed by the reality in the field.

The international order needs restructuring to be fair, inclusive, and reflective of international reality, where power, in all its aspects, is shared by many power centers. In this respect, how can we understand that one billion and a quarter Indians; one billion and a half Muslims: Arabs, Turks, Iranian, Malays, and others; half a billion Africans and half a billion Latin Americans are without effective representation at the helm of such a structure?

The world does not need a world war in order to have a new world order to prove that world orders in history are byproducts of major wars. The advancement of humanity in all aspects of life, the realization that we share a common destiny, the belief that peace and security is a common goal for all on earth, and the achievements of the last 7 decades of dealing with all issues affecting human lives, dictate that all of us must work seriously to reform the UN system. Such was the conclusion reached by the UN Secretary General’s high-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change which was set by Kofi Annan in 2003 and consisted of 16 eminent and experienced people, drawn from different parts of the world, in order to assess current threats to international peace and security; to evaluate how well our existing policies and institutions

have done in addressing those threats; and to recommend ways of strengthening the United Nations to provide collective security for the twenty-first century.

This report was clear in stating that all the United Nations principal organs are in need of change, including the Security Council. And it offered two alternative formulas for expanding the Council's membership. It is unfortunate that all of the recommendations that deal with restructuring the UN organs were ignored by the permanent veto members of the UN Security Council. This must not be the end to calling for reforming the UN system.

No region in the world has ever suffered from the unfairness of the international order, when bipolar and when unipolar, more than the Middle East region, particularly the Arab World. Our region has been the altar on which the principles of the international order were sacrificed. By the same principles that created Israel, the Palestinians were deprived of their homeland and denied their basic rights of self-determination and statehood. For almost seven decades our region has been going from one war to another, from one catastrophe to another, and from one UN resolution to another; and justice is still elusive. Hypocrisy on the part of great powers that are at the helm of world order and the "guardians" of its basic principles becomes the norm when it comes to Arab, Muslim, or Middle Eastern issues. The constant irresponsible use of veto power by the USA, Russia and China on issues of peace and security in our region are cases to prove that calling for restructuring the world order is a legitimate cause.

Saudi Arabia calls for and supports all efforts to reform the UN system, including reforming the Security Council to be more representative and truer to the basic principles of the UN, and for the General Assembly to have an international legislative power that cannot be vetoed if the veto is to be preserved under any restructuring of the Security Council.

Saudi Arabia declined a seat at the Security Council for the following reasons:

- 1) Since 1947, when Great Britain dumped the Palestinian issue on the UN, there has not come about a peaceful settlement of the issue. The reason is that the Security Council has failed to implement its own resolutions, 242 and 338 and the General Assembly resolution 181 because of the veto power of the US.
- 2) Since 1974 the UN has failed to establish a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East because Israel refuses to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty which was brokered by the UN Security Council.
- 3) For nearly three years, the bloodletting continues in Syria because Russia and China have vetoed the only viable proposal for an interim government composed of the Vice President of Syria and the opposition, with full powers and authority; all the while, Russia continues to

supply the Syrian regime with weapons and advice and Iran continues to supply it with men and arms. This state of affairs must not continue. The world must act. Europe, America, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Australasia must shed their amoral lethargy and pressure Russia and Iran to stop supplying the oppressor and give help to the victim.

Thank you.