Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal Criticizes the Israeli Government's Treatment of Palestinians During a Summit in Bahrain

A prominent Saudi prince strongly criticized Israel this week over the country's treatment of Palestinians and other issues during a conference in Bahrain. Prince Turki al-Faisal, who previously served as the kingdom's ambassador to the United States and United Kingdom, called out Israel for operating as a de facto apartheid state and accused it of being a Western colonizing power. Al-Faisal was speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Manama, where Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi was also in attendance. Al-Faisal also subtly spoke out against some of Saudi Arabia's regional allies for normalizing relations with Israel without fair concessions being made to the Palestinians. These normalization deals, dubbed the Abraham Accords, have only served to perpetuate the status quo, where Israel continues to oppress Palestinians without repercussions.

Prince Turki al-Faisal's remarks caught Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi off guard during the conference in Bahrain, as Ashkenazi and other Israeli leaders have grown accustomed to warm receptions from Gulf states recently in light of the normalization deals. However, al-Faisal's comments on Israel's repression of Palestinians are true according to the facts on the ground. He accused Israel of operating concentration camps where Palestinians were detained on the flimsiest of grounds, destroying Palestinian houses and property, and assassinating whomever they pleased with impunity. All of these charges levied against Israel are true and well-documented, regardless of the recent normalization agreements that have seen certain repressive Arab leaders turn their back on Palestinians' pursuit of social justice. After al-Faisal gave his remarks, which he stressed were made in his personal capacity and did not necessarily reflect the stance of the Saudi government, Gabi Ashkenazi said he "regretted" the comments and claimed that they were not reflective of the current changes happening in the Middle East.

Prince Turki al-Faisal reiterated that normalization with Israel should only occur if the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative was implemented. This Saudi-led effort would give Israel normalization with all Arab nations in return for a Palestinian state on land seized by Israel during the war in 1967. Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan echoed this sentiment, saying that sustainable peace in the region was viable only through the establishment of a legitimate Palestinian state. This stance is thought to closely mirror the opinion of Saudi King Salman, although his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is more open to reconsidering the Saudi-Israeli relationship in order to counter the presence of their mutual adversary Iran.

Recently, there has been an effort by the United States under the Trump administration to coax Saudi Arabia into joining the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in normalizing relations with Israel. A secret meeting was recently held in the Saudi city of Neom between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mohammed bin Salman, where it is rumored that normalization was discussed. However, public opinion in Saudi Arabia remains largely opposed to normalizing relations with Israel based on the status quo, and it is thought that bin Salman is driving the effort to counter Iran's presence in the region and to increase direct investment in Saudi Arabia.