

Interview with
Prince El Hassan bin Talal

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INTERVIEW WITH
PRINCE EL HASSAN BIN TALAL(1)

**Iraq's Break-up Will Lead
to "100 Years War"**

The prince of Jordan issues a stern warning, saying the fragmentation of Iraq would lead to the “Balkanization” of the Middle East.

After a keynote speech at the European Policy Centre in Brussels on the “coexistence of civilizations” Prince El Hassan bin Talal, crown prince of Jordan in the final days of the late King Hussein, spoke to Today’s Zaman. Answering questions ranging from the situation in Iraq to his grandfather’s revolt against Ottoman rule, Prince Hassan made it clear that the idea of breaking Iraq into pieces, as is circulating in some US and Israeli circles, would be a fatal mistake. The Jordanian prince warned that a possible break-up would play into the hands of Israeli “extremists,” making Israel the dominant minority in a region of minorities.

Stressing that he was as concerned as the neighboring countries, i.e., Turkey, Iran and Syria, about the prospects of a possible break-up, Prince Hassan said that the US realized its mistakes but that it was “too late.”

Once dubbed the next king of Jordan, Prince Hassan is now one of the leading intellectuals and activists of the Islamic world. While critical of the US for not being prepared to “win the peace,” Prince Hassan was also very tough on the late Saddam Hussein. He argued that Saddam had started his own demise by attacking Iran back in 1980. On the US, Prince Hassan stated he thought their biggest mistake during and after the invasion of Iraq was their lack of cultural affinity. By this he implied that the US did not really understand the true currents and cross currents of the country; a mistake that has now proved fatal not only for Americans but for Iraqis as well.

When asked about the possibility of a Shiite belt in the Middle East stretching from Teheran to Beirut and including a large portion of the Persian Gulf, Prince Hassan did not seem too worried, noting that the current president of Iraq is a Kurd.

On the controversial topic of Turkey’s right to active pursuit in northern Iraq of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) terrorists, Prince Hassan lent his support to Turkey, stressing that if it felt its interests threatened, it was entitled to go after the terrorists. Underlining his opposition to an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq, Prince Hassan stated he regretted that the reform process of the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat era was derailed by World War I. Being the grandson of the late Ottoman statesman Şakir Paşa, Prince Hassan can understand

Turkish but is hesitant to speak it. He said his mother was born in Emirgan, İstanbul.

The idea of splitting Iraq into three—Kurdish, Sunni and Shia—has been circulating for a while in the US and Israel. Do you think it could be a remedy?

The definition of Sunni and Shia is an erroneous one, because after all many of the Kurds are Sunni and if we add Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds, then we are talking a majority in numerical terms.

Secondly, the sectarian realties of Iraq were contained between 1925 and 1958 by the constitution of the monarchy that was established by my late great uncle King Faisal I on the basis of power-sharing arrangements whereby the central budget was shared in terms of returns equitably by all Iraqis. I want to remind you that since the invasion of Iraq ... returns in oil have not been financed in an equitable manner as to be shared by all Iraqis.

Much of the fight continues on the basis of serious mistakes recognized today, but too late, by the Americans, i.e., dissolving the armed forces providing the resistance with such a large number of well-trained fighters, and indeed not securing the weapons stocks, arms arsenals or the opening the Iranian border and then closing it after Iranians had clearly taken advantage of this open border policy. I think as far as the destruction

of Iraq, the breakup of the country is not preordained and I don't think it should be self-realizing.

At this point I want to cite the Clean Break paper of 1996 attributed to the conservatives in the US. It seems to me that the concept of pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, supra-national identity was actually taken to pieces by this paper, arguing somehow that fragmentation was taking place in that part of the world, so let us take full advantage of this. Muslims and Arabs do not need enemies as they are doing an excellent job of destroying each other. Of course this plays into the hands of Israeli extremists that believe Israel should emerge as the dominating minority in a region of minorities or a mosaic of minorities.

I understand you are vehemently against the idea?

I think it would be a disaster; fragmentation of Iraq, fragmentation of Sudan, fragmentation of Lebanon would be the beginning of the end and we are already on a runaway train.

What you mean by the “end”?

End of the Westphalian system, the end of the Middle Eastern community of states, the beginning of a Balkanization that could lead, in the words of the former Iraqi Defense Minister Ali Allawi, to a new 100 years of war.

You share the concerns of Turkey, Iran and Syria then?

Deeply so.

What do you think about Turkey's warnings that it could go into northern Iraq to chase Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorists?

Unfortunately the right of hot pursuit seems to be exercised by different regimes and governments, in different parts of the earth and at different times. I don't see why Turkey should be any different if it feels that its national interest is jeopardized by the PKK. After all, the Iranian equivalent of the PKK entered Iranian territory and was fiercely routed out by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. There were also confrontations with Syria.

I think this idea of a Kurdish identity developing into a Kurdish autonomy is already stabilizing within the Kurdish region in Iraq. I do not see why it should be taken any further if it has the potential to a bloody confrontation with its neighbors. Cultural self-determination was recognized by the Sevres Treaty in 1920, but I would hope a time comes when cultural self-determination could be discussed at a supra-national level in the Middle East between states but not at the expense of potentially the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

Can I conclude that Jordan is equally concerned about an independent Kurdish state?

I cannot speak for the government; I am not an official of Jordan. My view is that World War I prevented the successful implementation of the Millet (National) System and Tanzimat, which was the reform program

of the Ottoman Empire. What I do believe is that a commonwealth of Middle Eastern or West Asian people should be based on pluralism and respect for the other, not aggression and the violation of others' rights.

What do you think were the biggest mistakes of the Americans in Iraq?

I do not want to be judgmental about the end of Saddam Hussein's regime. After all this was almost inevitable. The first signs of the beginning of end were when Saddam's presidency decided to take on violent confrontation with Iranians. I never understood what the strategic benefit of that confrontation was. I might have understood that there was some strategic thinking. But that war was the beginning of an attrition that continues today of Muslims killing each other. The killing between Shiites and Sunnis is an extension of that.

Maybe the biggest mistake was the reported conversation between Mr. [Paul] Bremer and Ayatollah Sistani. Of course the two did not meet, but Bremer told Sistani through his intermediary, "This is your opportunity to rise and get power from the Sunnis which was taken from you for 14 centuries." Sistani replies through his intermediary: "You are an American and I am a Persian born in Sistan. Who are we to decide the future of the Iraqi people?"

The biggest mistake, if I may, was the lack of cultural affinity and the absence of a plan to win the peace. If

you recall the Marshall Plan, it was envisaged in 1941 before the end of World War II. So it does not come as a surprise to me that the US defeated Iraq, but what comes as a surprise is the fact that nobody thought of the consequences of the war and the steps required to stabilize not only Iraq but also all the region as a whole.

What should be done right now?

Breaking the cycle of violence is absolutely essential. Reconciliation can be a remedy if given a chance; it worked in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, East Timor. In the case of Iraq, I held six rounds of talks with religious leaders; Sunni, Shiite, Christian. In all of them I found the parties most grateful for the opportunity to exchange views. Two bishops told me, “If for only one thing, we want to thank you for 30 years we have not spoken each other.”

Bremer was right on one point though: The Ottomans never entrusted the Shiites with authority. Are you concerned that historical pattern is now being changed with the looming possibility of a rise in Shia Islam all over the Arab world?

As far as Iranian nationalism is concerned it should be taken out of the Shia context. After all Shiites started in an Arab context. I am always asked if I am a descendant of the line of Imam Ali, why I am not a Shiite. I reply, “How can the ehl-i beyt itself be a Shiite?”

The appeal of nationalist leaders like Ahmedinejad is, of course, reflected in Iraq. Iranians already say they will use each and every instrument available to them in the Gulf or around the world against US targets if they are attacked. How true this is I do not know. But when the question of Shiistan was raised within the Iraqi Parliament it was Sunni and Shiite Iraqis who opposed the concept. Let's not forget that the current president of Iraq is a Kurd.

INTERVIEW WITH
PRINCE EL HASSAN BIN TALAL(2)

**Prince Hassan: Turning the Page
on 1916 Is Long Overdue**

Prince Hassan of Jordan, the grandson of Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the emir of Mecca who led the Arab revolt against Ottoman rule in 1916, has said it is now time to turn a new page in Turkish-Arab relations.

Prince Hassan, who was the crown prince of Jordan for 34 years from 1965 to 1999, until the late King Hussein's sudden decision in his last days to name his son Abdullah the next king, understands Turkish but is hesitant to speak. Since his mother was born in Emirgan, İstanbul, the prince says he feels closeness to Turkey and the Turks.

Emphasizing that it is now time to put an end to the festering of the wound that was opened by the Arab revolt against the Ottomans in 1916, Prince Hassan notes that the Arab revolt came seven years after Sultan Abdülhamid II was deposed by the Young Turks in a military coup. The prince wants the hateful Arab documentaries against Turks to stop.

Touching upon the rocky relations between Turkey and the European Union, Prince Hassan believes the

talk about Turkish distinctiveness in terms of its culture is “nonsense.” According to Prince Hassan, Turks have been Europeans for generations.

In an article published in the *Israeli daily Ha'aretz* on Aug. 14, 2006, you say the Jordanian armies fought with the Allies in two world wars. I thought there was no Jordan during WWI, that the region which today is called Jordan was then a part of the Ottoman Empire.

What I meant was the Arab army. That episode takes us back to the Turkish-Arab bitterness. We were accused by supporters of the Caliphate movement of attacking the Ottoman Caliph. But while the Arab revolt effectively started in 1916, if you recall the Young Turks entered Yıldız Palace in 1909.

What do you mean by Young Turks entering Yıldız Palace?

A vacuum was left. The German generals told the Turkish High Command that they couldn't defend a line south of Mosul. Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem were exposed. The idea was to protect and promote an Arab identity, in the same way Greeks and Albanians protected their identity. And then also the Turks fought to protect their own identity. These are the harsh realities of history—once we study history by analogy, by putting one's self into the shoes of the other, the more likely we are to stop these wounds from festering.

It is still a sensitive issue among Arabs and Turks. While Arabs are seen as traitors by Turks, Turks are seen as occupiers by the Arabs. Don't you think it is high time that both Turks and Arabs turn a new page?

I couldn't agree more. This is absolutely the bottom line. I met the Hizb ut-Tahrir people the other day in Denmark: They asked me if I believe this rubbish of democracy, the pluralism that I keep talking about. I asked them: "Which Caliphate do you want? Do you want an imami-khalifa?" I asked where are the institutions of Khalifa? Is zakat functioning? Do you want the Shar'iah to be implemented, including criminal law?" I mean that when the Hashemites rose up against the Ottomans, they had the Caliphate in mind, but they did not have any other option.

What should be done now?

I think our civil societies should come and start a civil initiative, either through TV programs or documentaries. All of the hateful documentaries should stop, particularly those shown in Arab countries of Arab national heroes (or traitors, seen from a different perspective) being hung from Turkish gallows... I cannot see what this serves. First of all, they are out of context. Secondly, I do not think that Arab nationalism should justify itself with opposition to others. I am not saying that any one nationalism is preferable to another. What I am saying is that our identity should be based on pluralism and respect for others.

What is the legacy of the Ottoman Empire now in the Middle East?

As I told you, the millet system and the elevation of religion over the political sphere were the two most important contributions. After all, the Ottomans did not create a theocracy. People should speak about the Ottoman state; it was not even an empire: “*Imparatoriye Osmaniye*.” Rather, the Ottoman state was a commonwealth.

How closely are you following Turkish-EU relations?

Close enough.

What do you think of the widespread belief among Turks that they are being discriminated against because they are culturally different?

I do not accept the concept of cultural difference. It is nonsense. I believe that many Turks today are effectively Europeans and that they have been Europeans for generations. So in terms of cultural differences, if you talk with me about Muslim extremists, well, there are also extremists in Latin American countries. There might come a moment when the Turkish government and its people will decide on the merits of a possible membership, whether to become a member, or whether to enjoy its benefits without being members, as the process now has been protracted.

In my view, perhaps this is totally unconventional or nondiplomatic, but why don't you tell the Europeans,

“We have an important foreign policy role to perform in the context of the wider neighborhood?” It is now time to fully understand the role of Turkey as a great stabilizer in its region and not only by its military role. Its role as a stabilizer and as a secular country is extremely important.

Does Arab public opinion follow Turkey’s EU process?

They do, but I should say for the wrong reasons. Unfortunately Arab-Turkish relations have not developed as they should have developed. My mother was born in Emirgan and I have a personal affinity with Turkey, but this is not the point. The fact that Muslims are their own worst enemies recalls colonialism and will be exploited by the West. This fragmentation simply has to end.

Do you think an American strike against Iran is likely, probably before the end of the Bush administration?

I do not think so, as three senior American generals have warned against it. As well, Kissinger, Perry, Schulz and Sam Nunn—they have all have voiced their concern. They even went further, calling for a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. There are two elements which are perceived as double standards in the region. The first is that the ballot box has not led to international recognition of the elected governments, whether we speak of Iraq or of the Palestinian territories. The second

is with the Iranian nuclear capabilities. It does not apply to Israel when it is a proven fact that their capabilities do exist.

The Saudi foreign minister once said that had the West dealt with Israel's initiative to own nuclear weapons it would now be much easier to handle the Iranian case. Do you agree?

The five permanent members of UN Security Council are hypocritically the principal providers of weapons to the world. There have been two new arrivals, Pakistan and India. If you add North Korea, we now have eight nuclear-armed nations. This leaves us with Israel and probably Iran and with the question if the number will be 10. There should be a regional systemic approach in which we can address these issues without any particular discrimination towards this or that country. Comprehensive means just that, including everyone. Why doesn't the Western Asian part of the world have a basic security structure? We have economic cooperation, we have the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, we have bilateral ties—but there is no integral regional structure for defense. This is an irony because when we were in CENTO, we were accused of being too Western leaning. Now if you are not Western leaning, particularly leaning on America, you are regarded as outside of the civilized world. I am not calling for a pact, but rather am calling for a degree of security, a fund

for cohesion. This would be with all the countries in the region, even at some level with the Israelis.

Israeli generals, in speaking with the Western media, argue that they should strike Iran on their own if the US does not carry one out. How would the Arab world react to such a strike?

If the Israelis want to carve out a peaceful tomorrow, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, they should stop talking in this manner. Not only the Israelis but all of the countries in the region. Today, the Gulf countries are spending \$60 billion on weapons. Joseph Steiglitz, the American economist, calculates that \$3 trillion has been spent on the “war on terror.”

The “war on terror” has been widely perceived by the Muslim masses as a war against Islam. How true is this perception?

It is perceived as global war on Islam because the streets are totally under their domination. As far as the protection of holy places, Turkey has played a very significant role, which I sometimes think is underestimated. This role was very clearly the elevation of religion above politics. The management of holy places: in Jerusalem, in Mecca and even in Najaf, where the Sublime Port had a very clear vision and respect for the center of Shi'ism and Shia scholarship. This was done in a satisfying manner.

Today it is a fact that we are facing a phenomenon that I would call the emergence of religious deregulators.

We call them terrorists, but they are actually deregulators [i.e., taking the interpretation of religious law upon themselves and away from scholars]. I do not know of any religion or cult that would say “I am justified in killing innocent civilians.” These people have privatized religion simply because we have given up consultations on holy places. We should have consultations for 360 days in a year in Mecca between [scholars from the schools of Islamic law] Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi, Hanbali, Zeydi, Imami, Ibadi. If you can hold a meeting between Hamas and el-Fatah in Mecca, (let’s remember Mecca is not the capital of Saudi Arabia and that these people were killing each other only two months earlier), why not accept intermediation between different political and religious entities? Why not pursue it under the moral authority of Islam, in Mecca with the participation of religious leaders in the manner of consultation or shura?