

## Talking Turki

Dec 16, 2006



Articles & Testimony

**P**rince Turki al-Faisal, the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., has resigned. The prince reportedly flew out of Washington after informing Condoleezza Rice, and his own staff, that he was leaving, just 15 months after arriving. The Saudi Embassy told the Associated Press that he was "going home to spend more time with his family." Such an excuse may satisfy the immediate requirements of news-agency reporting, but is almost certainly incomplete, and worryingly so. Prince Turki's resignation provides yet another reminder that one of America's most important relationships is laced with surprise and mystery.

At the end of August 2001, the prince resigned as chief of the General Intelligence Directorate, the Saudi CIA, supposedly for apparently similar personal reasons. At the time the CIA and State Department were clueless as to what it meant. The eventual wisdom was that Prince Turki's directorate had become, in the later words of Pulitzer-winner Steve Coll, "a financial black hole." But Prince Turki had also held Saudi Arabia's "Afghan file," making him the principal interlocutor with the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. And 10 days later, the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. took place. Bureaucratic Washington, then, will now be intensely interested in finding out exactly why Prince Turki has suddenly decided to leave this time.

Elements of what might be the relevant context are already out in the public domain. Two weeks ago, Nawaf Obaid, a young Saudi who has worked as adviser for Prince Turki both in Washington and in his previous assignment as ambassador in London, authored an op-ed in the Washington Post. While claiming his status as adviser but also saying the opinions were his own, Mr. Obaid wrote that the kingdom was considering "massive . . . intervention [in Iraq] to stop Iranian-backed Shiite militias from butchering Iraqi Sunnis." Options included "funding, arms and logistical support," which to some sounded awfully like the support the Saudis, under Prince Turki, clandestinely gave pre-9/11 to jihadist fighters in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia.

The article prompted a formal announcement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency calling Mr. Obaid's reportage "absolutely not true." It went on: "It also does not represent in any way the kingdom's policy and stand to support security, unity and stability of Iraq with all its sects and doctrines." Two days later, Prince Turki told Wolf Blitzer on CNN: "We [have] terminated our consultancy work with [Mr. Obaid]."

Less than a week before Mr. Obaid's article, Dick Cheney had made an extraordinary Thanksgiving weekend flight to Riyadh for a two-hour meeting with King Abdullah and Crown Prince Sultan. The spin was that Washington wanted more Saudi help in ensuring stability in Iraq -- although it would seem that ambassadors or foreign ministers are more suited for delivering messages than are vice presidents.

These pieces still don't quite fit, but they provide reason to believe that there's more to the story. Now, the spin on Prince Turki's return home is that he is about to replace his elder brother, Saud, who is afflicted by a bad back and Parkinson's disease, as foreign minister. Possible, but probably too simplistic. Prince Turki is bright and able, though some who know him say he never fully recovered from a bad case of carbon-monoxide poisoning he suffered when staying in a camper van on a desert trip in the mid-1980s.

There has been an almost mystical quality to much of the reporting about Prince Turki since he arrived in

Washington. Much is made of his education at Princeton and Georgetown. Prince Turki's version, in a speech at Princeton on Dec. 7, was more candid: "[This was] where I briefly spent some of my misspent youth." Indeed, returning to the kingdom in some disgrace, he reportedly spent a year avoiding his father, the then-king, Faisal, before being sent to Georgetown. The Saudi ambassador at the time, instructed to make sure Prince Turki behaved, had little alternative but to take him in as a house guest.

Official U.S. analysis of the Saudi kingdom seems torn between viewing it as a kind of Camelot, with its (Islamic) chivalry, or as Disneyland -- military personnel sometimes refer to it as "the magic kingdom." In reality, the Saudi royal family needs to burnish its Islamic credentials to maintain legitimacy and quiet domestic discontent. Post-9/11, past compromises with Islamic radicals have come back to haunt the royalty, in addition to serving as an irritant in relations with the U.S.

An additional dimension derives from the 2003 invasion of Iraq: A huge Shia-dominated neighbor has emerged on its northern border. Saudis see Shias as threatening their security and leadership of Islam, and perceive them to be Iranian surrogates. In response, Saudi Arabia has been reaching out to Sunni states like Egypt and Jordan. Dramatically, even contacts with Israel have not been ruled out. One report suggests that it was not Saudi national security advisor Prince Bandar who had a clandestine autumn meeting in Amman with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, but Prince Turki. The logic: As intelligence chief, he had established a back-channel relationship with the Mossad.

Despite the continuing high oil prices, for once U.S. difficulties with Saudi Arabia do not appear to be dominated by immediate energy concerns. The main challenge appears to be to steer Riyadh between a near holy confrontation with Shia Iran and an equally destabilizing alliance with radical Sunnis. As an experienced and well-liked envoy, Prince Turki will be hard to replace.

One early danger is that the kingdom is close to acquiring nuclear weapons rather than continuing to rely on the longstanding security guarantees and understanding of successive administrations in Washington. Last month a Saudi official privately warned the kingdom would not tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran. Pakistan (for bombs) and perhaps North Korea (for rockets) are potential allies. There are already credible reports of facilities in the desert that the Saudis claim are oil-related, although there are no pipelines in sight. Also, North Korean personnel have been spotted at military facilities.

Iraq, Iran, nuclear weapons, oil. Washington desperately needs a new, reliable Saudi interlocutor.

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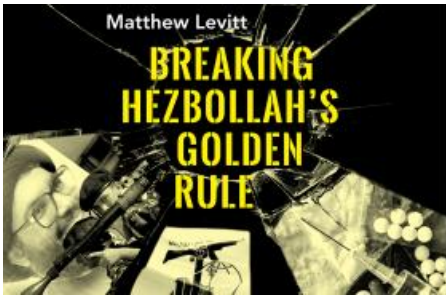
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