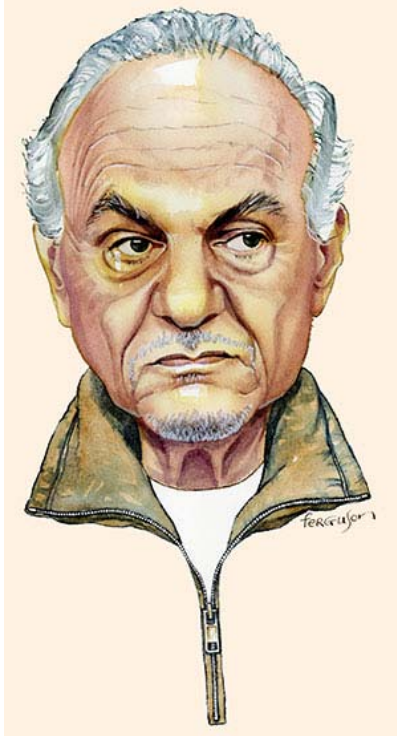


## Lunch with the FT: Prince Turki al-Faisal

By Edward Luce  
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The man who headed Saudi Arabia's intelligence service for 24 years talks to Edward Luce about equal rights for Saudi women, and which country has the best spies



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I have been waiting 20 minutes before Prince Turki al-Faisal arrives, looking flustered. “My driver had to drop me off five blocks away,” he says apologetically. “All the streets are cordoned off.” I tell him the brouhaha is for Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, who is in Washington, DC, for the week. The former head of Saudi intelligence laughs and says: “That’s just another inconvenience that Netanyahu is causing.”

We have arranged to have lunch at the Occidental Grill & Seafood, a smart restaurant very near the White House. In addition to the roadblocks, there is a lot of snow outside. Turki, 69, is dressed in several layers and is wearing a dark trilby hat, which he entrusts to the coat check staff.

I have requested a booth to minimise the noise. It helps but unfortunately not so much as to block out the restaurant’s soundtrack of cheesy 1950s hits.

Having been head of Saudi Arabia’s General Intelligence Directorate (GID) for 24 years – stepping down in 2001 just 10 days before the 9/11 attacks – Turki is probably the most experienced spy on the planet. Since then he has been Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the UK and Ireland and then to the United States. Now he runs a think-tank in Riyadh, the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies, and travels the world giving lectures and meeting friends. It sounds like a nice life, I say. “For me it’s heaven on earth,” he replies.

A scion of Saudi Arabia's royal family, the House of Saud, Turki is the youngest son of King Faisal, who was assassinated in 1975. Turki's brother, Saud al-Faisal, is foreign minister, and cousins and brothers dominate the upper echelons of the government.

Turki is in town for several weeks to lecture at Georgetown University, which he attended as an undergraduate (leaving in 1968). Before that he was at Lawrenceville, a boarding school near Princeton. Washington must feel like a second home to him, I observe. "Yes but I have plenty of second homes," he says. "There is London, Paris. I travel a lot. I meet people. I say what I want to say. I am having the time of my life – *Alhamdulillah* [praise be to Allah]."

Since he first set foot here as a teenager almost 60 years ago, surely America must be first among equals of Turki's second homes, I suggest. He nods. We are interrupted by the waitress coming to take our order. Turki orders a house steak, medium cooked, and an endive salad. He is drinking iced tea. I choose the Maine lobster roll and a side salad. I'm drinking Diet Coke. Turki is keen to get back to his thoughts on America.

"There are certain characteristics about Americans that I find constant," he says. "One of them is a tremendous curiosity about you. They want to know more about you – they ask about your family. It is a quality that brings you closer to them. They read up about you before. Nowadays it is on Google. That I found throughout my engagement with America, as a teenager, as a man of responsibility and now as a senior citizen. Americans are also very hospitable – they are always ready to host you in some form or another. These are constant qualities that I find very endearing." I wonder whether being a Saudi prince helps in this regard but say nothing.

As our dishes arrive – both courses are put on the table at once – I ask what he thinks has changed in the US over the years. In between enthusiastic jabs at his steak, Turki speaks almost continuously. His demeanour is warm but I am struck by his piercing eyes. He clearly loves talking about America. "When I was here in the 1960s, LBJ was still president – he had it all. He did the Great Society, internal social reform, expansion of the welfare state, he also conducted a massive external war in Vietnam – 500,000 Americans were there," he says. But things have changed. America is now in an era of choices, yet it seems incapable of making them. "In Johnson's days when I was in college, he was very good at bringing in the Republicans to support him," says Turki.

"Now there is polarisation – that sense of waywardness and distraction. Two extremes pulling American society and we don't have the centre pulling them back. The middle used to absorb – there were shock absorbers. It doesn't do that any more."

How, I ask, do America's internal problems affect the Middle East? At the mention of his own corner of the world, Turki's pace slows measurably. He reminds me that Barack Obama is about to make his first trip to Saudi Arabia since 2009. Back then the president was accused by US conservatives of "kowtowing" to the Saudi king after making a long bow. The atmosphere has since changed. Relations between Washington and Riyadh have rarely been worse. The al-Sauds got along famously with both Bushes but there is great mistrust of the Obama administration, particularly over its pursuit of nuclear talks with Iran, which Saudi Arabia sees as its arch-enemy. "Let's say that people are talking about the American retreat, particularly in the Middle East," Turki says.

"For the Kingdom, it is a matter of putting our foot down, where in the past we did not. It is a matter of accepting reality. You have to acknowledge the world has changed. Obama's speech

to the UN last September made it clear that America will be concentrating exclusively on Palestine and Iran, and for everywhere else – Syria, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Mali, Iraq, Egypt, and so on – you will have to fend for yourself. So whether it is collecting your [Saudi Arabia's] own resources to do that, or reaching out to others in the area to help you overcome these challenges, we are adjusting to the reality of a retreating America.”

I am mindful that Turki remains a controversial figure in the west. In 2004, Paris Match was ordered to pay Prince Turki damages after the French magazine had accused him of foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks. The next year a US court ruled that he and other Saudis were immune from prosecution over 9/11 (although that is now under appeal). Turki has called al-Qaeda an “evil cult”. But the fact that he stepped down just 10 days before the attacks was poor optics. Was 9/11 an intelligence failure, I ask? “Yes, across the board,” he replies. “Now when you look back on it, signals should have been picked up that weren't, information that should have been shared wasn't – across the whole intelligence community. I know there is a lot of work being done to get away from those failures, not reading signs correctly, etc. That's the main reason there hasn't been the same spectacular events as happened in 2001. Not just in America but also in Saudi Arabia.”

Turki has by now polished off his steak. The greens to its side are left untouched. The waitress asks if he wants to see a dessert menu. After some debate he goes for the cheesecake with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Buoyed by his example, I opt for the crème brûlée. I get a double espresso to go with it and Turki orders a regular coffee. I am curious to hear his assessment of America's intelligence capabilities today. I ask him to rank the best in the world in terms of data gathering, interpretation of data, and operations. Turki relishes the question.

“In terms of raw data, definitely the Americans have it over everybody because of their technical and financial means,” he says. “In terms of human resources, I would rate the British as having the most expert human capabilities on specific subjects – at that time [when he was head of Saudi intelligence], of course, it was the Soviet Union – the bane of everybody. To get a first-hand report from a British analyst always had that extra edge and knowledge that you felt comfortable in accepting as being authoritative. Probably in terms of operational capability and in terms of unleashing your capabilities, I would say the Israelis are the most professional, although they've committed lots of mistakes. But they do accomplish their missions.”

No mention of the Chinese? “That's what has changed the most since 2001,” he says. “I can only tell you that Chinese intelligence didn't loom large in those days.”

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The cheesecake seems to have accelerated Turki's rate of words per minute. He is positively buzzing. You obviously love sweets, I blurt out suddenly – you're a typical Bedouin [the original desert nomads of the Arabian peninsula]. Turki looks puzzled at my observation and ignores it. I feel slightly embarrassed at having indulged a stereotype and then risk more by asking him whether he likes dates. Luckily this gets him back on track. “I love dates,” he says. He mentions that his name, Turki, was given because he was the youngest of eight sons. It means the “unripened date that is left on the branch”, which will be picked later in the season. “Yes, I love dates passionately. I eat them every day.” Are you proud of having been born in [the holy city of] Mecca, I ask, now in full conversational risk mode. “Well, it's a privilege, but not especially,” he says. “It's fun to tell people that I'm a Meccawi.”

Having drunk my coffee, I move back on to international affairs, asking what he thinks of Vladimir Putin's incursion into Crimea? "I'm reminded of children's stories," Turki says. "The wolf is attacking a pack [sic] of sheep. It is gobbling up one of them and going about its business eating and the rest of the sheep are bleating." At this point he mimics a sheep: "Baaaaaa baaaaaaa." There is a twinkle in his eye. "This is what is happening today. While the wolf is eating the sheep, there is no shepherd to come to the rescue of the pack. This is where we find ourselves today."

But how should the west respond? I remind him that a few months ago he had criticised Obama for having set a red line on Syria's use of chemical weapons and then failed to act on it. The line then turns pink and eventually white, Turki had added. The Obama administration had reacted testily to his words. "If you are going to set a red line, you must act on the red line," Turki says now. "This is what Putin is very much a master of. He has kept quiet. You didn't hear him roaring, or boasting, or anything like that. He is quiet. The rest of the world is going baaaaaaa. It's a terrible situation." But what can the world reasonably do? Turki smiles. "You're British, he says, "so you would remember the charge of the light brigade [the disastrous British cavalry charge against well-defended Russian forces during the Crimean war]."

That having been settled, I turn the conversation to Saudi Arabia. Is Turki concerned that his country has such a poor reputation in the west, and particularly here in the US? I mention the ban on women drivers, among other things. "When I was ambassador talking to British, Irish and American audiences, I used to ask the question, 'Who is the most prized woman in Saudi Arabia today?' And the answer is, 'A woman with a job.' When I was growing up, the head of a family considered it shameful to ask his wife or daughter to get a job. He thought he should take care of his womenfolk. Because of education, the woman with a job became something of a prize and she brings in more income to her parents, she's looked up to by her siblings, and she's sought after by suitors."

But she still isn't allowed to drive, I point out. He nods. "But what I hear from people in my entourage, the women in my family, is that driving is not that important. What is important to them is equal legal rights, whether it is inheritance, divorce, childcare, things that affect women's livelihood. They say let us concentrate on improving these things first and not expend our energy on driving, because that will come by itself."

As the bill arrives, I tell him I have to head to a briefing on the latest Obama budget proposal. Turki laughs. "Is there any chance of that being passed?" he asks. No, I reply. "America is acting like a third world country," he replies. Then after a pause, he adds: "I watched the Oscars the other night. And I turned to the person next to me and said, 'You know, this is what America is best at – putting on a parade, crowds of people coming in and cheering and eating popcorn and living a wonderful life. In everyone's minds, this is what America is about. They live the good life.'"

I say that I agree with him in the main, except that life is getting tougher for the middle class. He interrupts: "But it's true, most Americans have the good life. They have those unique qualities of inquisitiveness and hospitality and they think of their country as nirvana. Every once in a while they get woken up by someone like Mr Putin – they get a reality check." He laughs. I half-expect him to mimic a wolf. He puts on his hat and we walk together into the snow outside.

*Edward Luce is the FT's chief US commentator*

