

The Afghanistan File

Prince Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud

The Afghanistan File, written by the former head of Saudi Arabian Intelligence, tells the story of his Department's involvement in Afghanistan from the time of the Soviet invasion in 1979 to Nine Eleven 2001. It begins with the backing given by Saudi Arabia to the Mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet occupation, and moves on to the fruitless initiatives to broker peace among the Mujahideen factions after the Soviet withdrawal, the rise to power of the Taleban and the shelter the Taleban gave to Osama Bin Laden.

A theme that runs through the book is the extraordinary difficulties Saudi Arabia and its allies had in dealing with the Mujahideen. Prince Turki found them magnificently brave, but exasperating. On one occasion in trying to arrange peace among them, he got permission from the King to open the Kaaba in Mecca, and had the leaders go inside, where they were overcome with emotion and swore never to fight each other again. A few hours later on their way to Medina they almost came to blows on the bus.

Turki's account gives details of the Saudi attempts in the 1990s to bring its volunteers out of Afghanistan – with chequered success – and his negotiations with the Taleban for the surrender of Osama Bin Laden. The book includes a number of declassified Intelligence Department documents.

Prince Turki explains that the nihilistic, apparently pointless terrorism that has been seen in the Middle East in the last twenty years had its origins in Afghanistan with Osama's deluded belief that he had helped defeat the Russians. There is no evidence that he ever fought them at all. Soon after Nine Eleven Saudi Arabia discovered that it had a home grown terrorist problem involving some of the returnees from Afghanistan. Much of the huge change that has taken place in the Kingdom since has stemmed from the campaign to tackle this.

Prince Turki Al-Faisal is the youngest son of King Faisal, who ruled Saudi Arabia from 1964 to 1975. He was educated at Princeton and Georgetown University. From 1978 to 2001 he was head of the Saudi Arabian General Intelligence Department, which was responsible for the Kingdom's dealings with Afghanistan, and for the next twenty-three years it was Afghanistan that absorbed most of his attention. Soon after he left the Department, he was appointed Ambassador to London from 2003 to 2005, and then Washington from 2005 to 2007. In these posts he argued first against the invasion of Iraq, and once that was a fait accompli, for a more sensitive, less radical political solution than that imposed by the Americans. Since he left Washington Prince Turki has been running the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh.



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