

# Faisal's Legacy

Kai Bird

**G**randfather was seventy-one years old when he met King Faisal. Saudi Arabia was the first foreign land he ever lived in. It happened that when grandad came to visit us in Saudi Arabia eleven years ago, Faisal had just ousted his senile brother from the throne. Grandfather managed to have himself invited to a diplomatic function honoring the new king—and there he shook the Arab monarch's hand. A world apart, no two men could have been more different, yet in some basic manner both were bred in the old, less mechanized world. Both men, the crusty and pious desert king and the retired Oregon lumberjack, had fought a harsh and unyielding land, and both carried the visible scars of their hard lives.

Grandfather had lost three fingers of his right hand in a sawmill accident during the Depression, and when the two old men shook hands, Faisal asked, "Did you lose your fingers in war?" Grandfather explained he had never been in uniform, but noticing the King's right eye, which as he grew older had a strange squint, he asked, "And did you wound your eye in combat?"

Since that time, eleven years ago, Saudi Arabia has spanned two centuries of modernization. During the next decade the country will become unrecognizable. The camel herds are disappearing, to be replaced by bedu-driven Ford pickup trucks. The semibitter cardamom coffee drunk by Faisal's generation can still be found in some Jeddah restaurants or out among remote bedouin tribes, but the national drink is Canada Dry (Coca-Cola is on the Arab boycott list), if not smuggled Black Label scotch. Driving north of Jeddah on the newly paved highway to Jordan and Lebanon, one occasionally comes across a piece of desert strewn with broken glass—liquor bottles smashed by the religious police. A fifth of scotch is easily worth \$25 on the black market.

These are only some of the more superficial signs of

a new class of independently wealthy Saudis, both of the extended royal family and of common bedu or immigrant background, who have turned their backs on the traditional Wahabi Muslim strictures against extravagant lifestyles. King Faisal's sudden assassination in March, 1975, ushered into power a younger generation of the royal Saud family, men familiar with both the West's material pleasures and its amorality. Undoubtedly, many of the social hypocrisies practiced by the royal family under Faisal's conservative eyes will now become unnecessary.

**E**leven years ago I witnessed Faisal's seizure of power in Riyadh. The bedu warriors and the royal family's personal "White Army" (the present-day national guard being trained by a California company) flocked to the desert capital. Camels and hundreds of sleek Arabian horses bedecked with bright red, orange, and yellow cloth saddles congregated outside Faisal's palace. Faisal emerged in the wide-open courtyard unguarded and alone; he was mobbed by the bedu, who waved unsheathed swords above his head, chanting praises to Allah on behalf of their new king.

In 1964 Faisal attained power at the expense of the extremely conservative religious "ulema" leaders. While his brother, Saud, ruled the kingdom, every school, every hospital built, each step to improve the standard of living in the country had to win the endorsement of the powerful religious councils. It was the American oil company, Aramco, that benefited from this political stalemate. Because the religious forces in the country were reluctant to use the oil revenues for any kind of modernization, the oil company suffered very little pressure to funnel more of its profits inside the kingdom. During the 1950's King Saud used the royal family's income almost solely for those extravagant displays of wealth so well caricatured in the Western press.

By contrast, when Faisal was assassinated March

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King Khalid and Crown Prince Fahd (RNS)

25, he had ready for final approval a \$140 billion Five Year Plan that will transform this theocratic society beyond recognition. The program, which has now been approved by King Khalid, calls for the construction of the world's largest petrochemical complex, steel mills, auto plants, consumer product factories, and a string of desalination plants along the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf to irrigate potentially fertile farmlands. King Khalid has said the money must be used to upgrade the standard of living for as many Saudis as possible; he has ordered a crash program of hospital construction (ninety-seven new hospitals) and 100,000 new housing units in all parts of the kingdom.

Ten years ago such a comprehensive program would have been inconceivable. But since then the royal government has essentially immobilized what was once a nomadic society; this has in turn weakened the conservative religious institutions. The tribes have migrated to the cities for most of the year and are becoming permanently settled in villages built with government-staffed schools. Thousands of water wells were drilled and irrigation projects expanded to encourage the tribes to remain year round in one settlement, but in many cases they have preferred the cities to the rural settlements.

Few Saudis remain unaffected by rising material expectations, which are now concrete and realizable. Today there are 517,000 boys and 210,000 girls in schools, and many of these can expect to continue their studies in American or Middle Eastern universities. For more than a decade now these Saudi children have been watching television—Egyptian romances, "Bonanza" dubbed in Arabic, a version of "Sesame

Street," and regular evening newscasts.

Unlike Kuwait, however, King Faisal did not create a royalistic welfare state. Education and medical facilities are free, and in the near future housing will be subsidized. Government-subsidized sugar, wheat, and gasoline prices may well be the lowest in the world. The government does not make a practice of subsidizing private business, and the Saudi citizen is strongly encouraged to earn his own living, though very few Saudis do any kind of menial labor. A Saudi will drive his own taxicab, he may run a small truck farming business and sell vegetables, he may take a low-paying clerical job with the government civil service, but he will certainly not work on a construction crew. Menial labor is almost exclusively relegated to the alien work force—up to one million Yemeni laborers, and several thousand Sudanese, Ethiopian, and Palestinian expatriates. Excluding the civil service, the military, and the oil industry, the entire Saudi service economy is dependent on Yemeni and other foreign labor.

There simply aren't that many native Saudis to man the vast industrial projects envisioned by King Faisal. While officially the government maintains there are eight million people in the kingdom, most experts believe there can't be more than six million, including a million foreigners. Nevertheless, it was under Faisal's rule that so many foreigners were admitted into the kingdom over the strenuous objections of both the tribal and religious leaders of Mecca and Medina. In conjunction with the new Five Year Plan it is expected that an additional 450,000 and perhaps a million new foreigners will work in the kingdom. The presence of so many foreigners, both Christian and

non-Wahabi Muslim, even if concentrated in a few larger cities, is a matter of great concern to many thinking Saudis. They want the best technical civilization money can buy, but even some of the modernizers reject adoption of Western cultural norms that would destroy the Saudi extended family system. Unlike Iran or India, almost every Saudi student sent abroad for training returns to the kingdom.

**I**nevitably Faisal's progressive policies planted the seeds of impatience, higher aspirations, and resentment against the stringent taboos on liquor, dress, and a wide range of Western consumer goods. Political opposition from Faisal's left came from among the same students and professors of institutions that benefited from the sudden growth of the educational system. If Faisal was an enlightened man of his generation, he was still an uncompromising autocrat. Amnesty International estimates there may be five thousand political prisoners presently jailed inside Saudi Arabia, but this figure carries very little credibility with most observers. Reliable sources inside the kingdom assert there are fewer than a hundred Saudi nationals imprisoned on political charges. Shortly after Faisal's assassination King Khalid announced a full pardon, ostensibly for all political prisoners. At least some of those still imprisoned were arrested during a quiet and unsuccessful coup d'état in August, 1969. The two most prestigious educational institutions in the kingdom, the University of Petroleum and Minerals and the Air Force training schools, were held responsible for the attempted coup. A small group of young air force officers, some of whom were trained in the United States, reportedly planned the coup under the influence of the popular and extreme Pan-Islamist propaganda of Libya's Colonel Qaddafi.

The attempted coup d'état in 1969 was never a serious threat to the Saud family's hold on the kingdom, but it nevertheless must have deeply shocked Faisal. The real question now is what pressures may arise in the next five years, and will new political prisoners be part of the necessary price, as in Iran, to maintain the royal regime? Much of the Saudi Kingdom's political viability depends on what happens in the larger Arab-Israeli conflict. If Arab objectives in the Middle East conflict, whatever they may be, are not realized during the next few years, there are hard-liners inside and outside the Saudi royal family willing to sweep away the monarchy to make room for a more determined and extreme approach to the conflict.

After the 1969 coup attempt Faisal took concerted steps to respond to both the domestic rumblings and the Pan-Islamist pressures. During the next four years Faisal's reputation, partly based on the increasing oil revenues, grew from that of a reclusive desert monarch into that of an astute manipulator of Middle Eastern events. Faisal's financial backing of Sadat and his reconciliation with the Egyptian Arab nationalists were instrumental in Sadat's decision to go to war in Oc-

tober, 1973. But most important of Faisal's external policies was his financial backing of the Yasir Arafat wing of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Saudi backing of Arafat's non-Communist, purely nationalistic, Palestinian party, el-Fatah, was not without consequences. Faisal gave strength and "respectability" to this "moderate" Palestinian faction, and if a third state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is ever imposed on the antagonists, it will owe much of its success to King Faisal.

Following the aborted coup Faisal internally coopted the progressive opposition by using the increased oil revenues from a gradual take-over of Aramco on training more petroleum engineers, economists, and air force officers. This new educated élite, most often of "commoner" background, naturally benefited from the "Saudization" of managerial level positions in the oil industry.

An extremely conservative man in his personal habits and religion, Faisal was capable on a political level of bridging the ideological gap to the Saudi "left"—that growing middle-class group of Western-educated commoners—engineers, military officers, construction contractors, government administrators, and teachers. The educated commoners in the kingdom have increasingly espoused the more secular doctrines of Arab nationalism; they are not socialists in any sense of the word, except insofar as they see themselves in opposition to the representatives of traditional Wahabi Islam, the ulemas.

**D**uring Faisal's ten-year reign commoners like Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, Minister of Petroleum, Abdel Hadi Taher, chief of the government-owned oil company, Petromin, and Hashem Nazer, head of the Saudi Central Planning Organization, rose to unprecedented positions of power. Not only were inept royal family members barred from decision-making roles, but royal family allowances were cut. Old-line merchants of commoner background and even a number of enterprising Yemeni, African, and Pakistani immigrants were encouraged to expand their commercial activities. Until his recent death the head of the Saudi Monetary Bank was a prestigious international financier from Pakistan. Ahmed Juffali & Brothers, once a small Jeddah rug business in the local bazaar, currently has revenues of more than \$500 million. Ghaith Pharoan, thirty-four, whose father was once a close political advisor and doctor to Faisal, has built an almost equally large financial empire. These are only the most spectacular examples of a gradual redistribution of the kingdom's increasing wealth among commoners from all economic levels in Saudi society.

Mediating between the conservative Wahabi ulemas and the upwardly mobile middle-class commoner is the royal family. Though even today the political clout of the religious leaders cannot be discounted, under Faisal's rule the social status of the secular-minded

commoner did not suffer. Near the end of his life Faisal became confident enough to leave the powerful appointive post of "chief justice," or Qadi, in the religious courts vacant when the previous Qadi died in 1968.

Faisal was adept at this sort of royal politics; he managed to defuse quietly, though not without violence, the religious forces in the kingdom enough to inaugurate his modernization program. But he was nevertheless slain at the height of his power by the same religious fervor and fanaticism. Faisal's nephew and assassin, Prince Faisal Ibn Musad, had a brother who was killed by Saudi police during a 1965 demonstration against the imposition of Saudi television. The assassination was apparently an act of righteous revenge. The young Colorado- and California-educated assassin was beheaded in a public square in Riyadh in traditional fashion after a religious court determined the young man sane.

Faisal's brother, Khalid Ibn Abdel Aziz el-Saud, is a retiring, ailing, and undoubtedly pro-American successor to the throne. Early reports after the assassination tended to overemphasize the new king's role as a mere figurehead. It appears now that King Khalid has asserted his own will to rule, particularly in domestic affairs. Whether the royal family decides it is necessary to have a more dynamic personality on the throne will be determined by the senior members of the family and Crown Prince Fahd, Faisal's younger half brother and closest advisor. Fahd, a boisterous and ambitious fifty-four-year-old prince, has retained the key post of Minister of Interior since 1962. Armed with Faisal's considerable moral authority, it was Fahd who actually ruled internally, taking the brunt of the conservative religious opposition. Through his half brother, Abdullah Sudeiri, Fahd controls the "White Army," the Saudi National Guard. The White Army today is no match for the larger and more modern regular army, but it is a key element in Saudi royal family protection and politics.

Fahd was not designated full premier by King Khalid (as had been speculated), but he has been given substantially more power in both domestic and foreign affairs than he held under Faisal. Fahd has already introduced plans to proceed with the formation of a Consultative Council, an unusual departure from autocratic rule. King Khalid, perhaps upon the initiative of Fahd, issued the amnesty for political prisoners. The timing of this attempt at a broad reconciliation of political factions within the kingdom is characteristic of Fahd's own political acumen.

Crown Prince Fahd's experience and influence in inter-Arab politics is more limited than Faisal's, but it is not inconceivable that the necessity for strong Saudi leadership during the upcoming Middle East negotiations, particularly if there is a Geneva peace conference, may require the transfer of even more power to Fahd. Ruling circles within the royal family, however, are not likely to take the collective decision of actually

transferring the throne to Fahd unless there is some imperative reason. King Khalid will probably be left in place. But with the kingdom under this shade of collective royal family rule and the passing of Faisal's singular moral authority, Saudi Arabia is much more susceptible to pressures to modernize its political system. These pressures are not necessarily dramatic, though democratic sympathies exist. But these "modernizing" pressures, whether democratic or not, will require a remolding of the place of religion in Saudi political life.

**I**slamic society, particularly as it developed in the Arabian peninsula during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the Wahabi movement, required a religious relationship between the individual and his tribal authority. Even the Turkish empire of the nineteenth century was viewed as too secular. The revival of Wahabism under the energetic leadership of King Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud very quickly became a crusade against the Turkish "distortions" of Islam. The conquering of the Arabian peninsula by the Saud family never embodied any form of chauvinistic nationalism. Even today, Saudi allegiance is not to the state but to the nation of Islam.

King Faisal perceived in Western society a threat to the nation of Islam. Specifically, Faisal viewed the establishment of Israel as a threat to the conception of the larger Islamic nation. Every Muslim community in the world has always demanded the right to live under Muslim rule; Palestine was to be no exception. Faisal's uncompromising belief on this volatile issue can best be felt by quoting from an English-language exercise written by a young Palestinian student in a Beirut refugee camp: "My country is the precious land in my life; it is a gift from Allah, and because of this I love it after Him. I consider my land as my sister, and so I must take care of it. It is said that he who has no country has no religion, no honor, and therefore no existence."

Arab nationalism developed many strains of thought, but Pan-Islamic reformism, which weds Islam to the land, has become the most volatile ideology in the modern Middle East. In this view the Islamic world must adapt, educate itself in a technological sense, and rationally discard those cultural traditions not directly sanctioned by the Koran. Only those secular ideas needed to compete with the West are to be embraced; the remainder of the Islamic way of life is to continue intact.

Faisal embraced this attitude toward his religion, and finding himself in a position to effectuate reform, appropriated the oil revenues for a challenge to the West. At the end of his life he was the unquestioned moral force behind the Pan-Islamic movement. In harsh geopolitical terms the oil funds enabled Faisal to transform his feudal society into one capable of influencing the Arab-Israeli conflict—and perhaps much, much more.