

## *Reforms in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s\**

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The Desert Kingdom has gone through robust changes in the 1960s, but these changes go back to the year of 1958. Since the incompetent rule of Saud the Second have met increased resistance both domestical and international – first and foremost from Egypt and from the United States, which showed increasing antipathy –, the king was forced to give a key position to his brother Faisal and so named him prime minister. Faisal immediately set on to start his grand reform project which was in fact a loss mitigation: he cut expenses, fulfilled the IMF's requests, lowered the imports of fancy goods and stopped paying the tribal leaders' royalties. All of these reforms were done by 1960.

Besides his monetary reforms he started to organize the country's public education system. It is true that it would only have results in the late 1960s, but still this can be regarded as starting point. His main purpose with the educational reform was to ensure that a capable and well-prepared professional elite would participate in the administration. For this, he used young Saudis who were educated overseas. Therefore a new social stratum started to appear in Saudi Arabia which could be called middle class<sup>1</sup>: officers, skilled labourers<sup>2</sup>, businessmen (not necessarily in the oil business). The appearance of this group coincided with the increase of foreign employees (foreign Arabs among them) and also with the spreading of Arab nationalism, but could not be regarded as a product of them. However, there was a tight connection between the aforementioned: strikes against ARAMCO are good example for this. This new stratum was immediately used by different lobbies in their fight for power. Additionally, leaning on the discontent of the workers, several illegal and party-like organizations came into existence.<sup>3</sup> Among other things, the root of the foundation of the Saudi Arabian communist movement can be traced back here. It is worthwhile to note that there are several reasons why Saudi Arabian workers did not formed their own lobby, and so they could not act as an independent political force. The first among them is that nearly all skilled labour workers came from abroad and they were a relatively small group (the number of migrant workers were really low before the mid-late

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\* I would like to thank Ádám Rung for the grammatical checking of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> The middle class in Saudi Arabia is hardly the same as in Europe for example, but since we have no other term we need to use this, even though the standard definition of the term is not applicable to Saudi Arabia.

<sup>2</sup> Of course they are negligible compared to the full population or to any western country's rate of skilled labourers because the majority of Saudi Arabians consider many jobs menial. At any rate, it started the process of social modernization.

<sup>3</sup> As with the case of the middle class, the definition of party in Saudi Arabia could not be interpreted by western standards. Rather, they were ad-hoc and short-lived organizations.

1960s, and the amount of Saudi Arabian workers was negligible). The other reason is that every action that even remotely resembled a strike was retaliated by the Saudi Arabian Government: imprisonment was fairly common and during a more serious wave of strikes deportation was not unheard of (although most of the strikes were against ARAMCO and those workers rarely suffered such harsh punishment).<sup>4</sup>

The working class acquires real importance only in the 1970s. Nothing proves this better than the number of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. In 1963 the Saudi authorities registered 115.000 migrant workers (14 percent of the full labour force), while in the year of Faisal's death, 1975, they were more than 660.000 (40 percent of the full labour force). Not only the number of the migrant workers increased but also the amount of Saudi Arabian workers decreased – likely because of the heightened oil incomes.<sup>5</sup> It is important to mention that most of the migrant workers were only allowed to work in Saudi Arabia for one or two years and after that it was mandatory for them to leave the country. Not to mention that the Saudi Arabian Government was taking good care to ensure that migrant workers and local workers contact as little as possible; they were separated in small enclaves where they worked as segregated as possible and not just those migrant workers who came from the west, but other, non-Saudi Arabs too. There was one big advantage for these enclaves though; specific cultural millieus were created for the workers and these millieus resembled that of their own countries'. This shows well how hard it was for the workers to form any serious political organization or lobby be it a party or labour union. Thus they rarely participated in any strikes against the Saudi regime – of course ARAMCO workers were exception.<sup>6</sup>

In this period three major political groups can be distinguished in Saudi Arabia. The first among them was the progressivists' one, called the Free Princes<sup>7</sup>, led by Prince Talal, who wanted not only economic reforms but political ones also; above all, constitutional monarchy and the abolishment of seniority (basically more political influence for those who were not the sons of Ibn Saud, or not the next in queue for rulership). The majority of this group was young compared to the ruling elite of Saudi Arabia, and most of them studied abroad, where they contacted western ideologies and observed the western social and political systems.<sup>8</sup> The second group is the modernists' one which is composed by a few elder members of the royal family and is led by Faisal himself. Their aim was to achieve

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Niblock: *Saudi Arabia. Power, Legitimacy and Survival*. Routledge, Abingdon, 2006. 43.; Michel G. Nehme: Saudi Arabia 1950–1980. Between Nationalism and Religion. *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 30 (1994), Issue 4. 934–936.; Mordechai Abir: The Consolidation of the Ruling Class and the New Elite in Saudi Arabia. *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23 (1987), Issue 2. 161–165.

<sup>5</sup> It is not the subject of this article but it is worthwhile to note that from the 1970s and 1980s there were lots of workplaces which were actually pointless. The sole purpose for these was to pay the unemployed masses: allowances were not an option as many Saudis would have found those humiliating and morganatic but with these workplaces the state could pay those who didn't have any qualification and thus were unemployed. For this reason the employment rate in Saudi Arabia is strikingly high. Of course this put a heavy weight on the economy of the country.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Niblock: *op. cit.* 42–44.

<sup>7</sup> Some sources call them Najd al-Fattah or Young Najd.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Willie Morris who was the British ambassador in Saudi Arabia from 1968 to 1972 pointed out this fact to the British Government. The National Archives UK – Records of the British Council. BW 182/2 (piece). CL/SA.AR/680/1.

the highest possible economical and social advancement and also to make Saudi Arabia a modern state. This, however, in no way meant that they wanted political changes or the sharing of power but it is a fact that they still wanted to ensure good relations between the ruler and the *ulema*.<sup>9</sup> The last group consists of the conservatives; most of the royal family belongs there among with tribal leaders and the ulema and is led by Saud II. They are interested in keeping the *satus quo* and in preventing modernization which they completely reject. This conception roots in wahhabism, which is the most puritan Islamic denomination so it is not a coincidence that the dominant members of this group are the ulema.<sup>10</sup>

An interesting fact about these groups is that by the end of Faisal's reform programme all of them turned against him. The stance of the ulema and saudists (the supporters of Saud) doesn't require further explanation, the fact, however, that the Free Princes, who were completely supportive of Faisal's reforms before, did the same, does. The reason is not complicated. This group which comprised mainly of the new liberal strata (more on the subject later) was mostly under the influence of nasserism and for this reason wanted to establish a republic in the near future for Saudi Arabia, similar to that of Egypt's. However, not long after his rise to power, Faisal made it clear that changing the status quo is not in his interest. Of course Saud II played on this: he promised to create a constitution and to broaden political rights for everyone in the country and also promised extensive reforms. Thus he managed to secure the support of the Free Princes (in addition to the already supportive tribal leaders) and as a result of this he could remove Faisal from power. At first it seemed that some serious changes would happen in Saudi Arabia, as Talal was given the post of Financial Minister, work has begun on a draft for a constitution as well as on establishing a National Council. Unfortunately it is not clear what they meant by that organization because it could not come to light, since 3 days after these announcements, in 1960. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December, Saud II shut down all reform projects. Thus Talal couldn't realise his conceptions and Saud II made his task more and more harder until the point he was forced to resign in September 1961. Throughout the next year Saud's rule was solid even though the country's financial problems were still present (to be more precise, present again). The new turning-point in the relation of Faisal and Saud was the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war.<sup>11</sup>

Saud's policy resulted in very similar consequences like that of Faisal's two years before. Devotees of the reform program turned away from him; furthermore, the conservative strata have begun to hold a grudge against him for allying with the progressivists. Hence the influential groups started to support Faisal again, so Saud II had no choice but to reappoint his brother as prime minister. In November 1962 Faisal announced his reform project which he called the ten-point programme and at a first glance it seemed that he would actually reform the political system of Saudi Arabia, of course "in accordance with the Quran and the sharia"<sup>12</sup>. He promised to make a draft of constitution as

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<sup>9</sup> Ulema is the plural of *alim*. An *alim* is – basically – a religious scholar who also helps Saudi people in everyday problems (indirectly) and functions as a moral compass for them.

<sup>10</sup> Mordechai Abir: *op. cit.* 158–160.

<sup>11</sup> Nadav Safran: *Saudi Arabia: the Ceaseless Quest for Security*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1988. 92–94.

<sup>12</sup> Islamic religious and common law system.

well as a consultative council, which would have recruited consultants from all over Saudi Arabia thus that would have been organized on a regional basis.<sup>13</sup>

Faisal's ten-point programme comprised of plans about infrastructural developments (public roads and railway lines), improving communication (making of phone lines all over the country in this period), furthermore, by improving education he deliberately lessened the ulema's influence (more on this later on).<sup>14</sup>

He laid down the basics of the social system; state-supported aids were given to people in need instead of the entirely incidental tribal aids or religious charity grants. In 1962 legislation made the first law that ensured the provisioning of people who were above 60 years old, orphan, incapable or woman without anyone to provide for. The same law assured that new orphanages, boarding schools, remand-homes, and schools for disabled people would be built in the forthcoming years. Also this year saw the abolition of slavery in Saudi Arabia (till that period 32.000 slaves were in the country altogether). In 1969 the first labour act was made for better work conditions and shorter work hours.<sup>15</sup>

With the aid of foreign consultative organizations (like the Stanford Research Institute) and the IMF Faisal fixed the country's economy again (as this was the second time Faisal asked for the IMF's help). Faisal, following the IMF's recommendations, established the Committee for Economic Development in 1959. That committee was replaced in 1961 by the Supreme Planning Board. Both the Committee and the Board were unsuccessful, because they became involved in the problems of the domestic and international business community rather than projecting future plans and solutions for the country's current economic problems. Thus the Board was replaced in 1965 by the Central Planning Organization (CPO). The CPO's objective was to organize a centralized, government-controlled new economic system which contains everything from road-building through agricultural decisions to the operation of heavy industry in order to make sure that Saudi Arabia has the biggest possible independence concerning the production of raw materials and end products.<sup>16</sup>

However, Faisal's political promises remained promises, because as soon as he saw his rule secured he conventionally forgot about the formerly planned reforms and declared that Saudi Arabia has a unique governmental system and he did not wish to copy the political system of any other country. Therefore many of the planned changes did not come to pass including most of the economic development plans (although, it should be stated that he didn't cancel them he merely postponed their inauguration). The suspended animation-like state of the economic plans remained till the end of the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, when the king finally accepted the fact that radical changes must be implemented in the economic structure of the country. Albeit Saudi Arabia did not participate in the war itself, it gave serious financial aids to the allied Arabian countries. Moreover, because the Arabian public opinion considered the loss of the war against Israel as the failure of Arab nationalism, it is a curious thing that the position of Saudi Arabia was strengthened in the region; Arabs started to see Saudi Arabia as some kind of savior. In order to keep this favorable position,

<sup>13</sup> Nadav Safran: *op. cit.* 97–98.

<sup>14</sup> Toby Craig Jones: *Desert Kingdom. How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2010. 60–62.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Niblock: *op. cit.* 38–40.

<sup>16</sup> James Wynbrandt: *A Brief History of Saudi Arabia.* Facts on File, New York, 2004. 219–227.

the kingdom continued to aid the beaten Arab countries financially. Because of this, the Arabian peoples of the Middle East started to appreciate Saudi Arabia more and more and so it was evident for the Desert Kingdom to take the matter of the Palestinian refugees and Palestine in general into its own hands and to try to find a solution. This resulted in, however, the Saudi economy reaching its own limits even despite the huge oil revenues. The economic reforms were long overdue, so no more delays were acceptable; the reforms had to be implemented. The Saudi leadership trusted that a hastened reform programme that is suitable for the needs of capitalism would be sufficient to invigorate the economy, and they also hoped that the progressivists would be satisfied with the modernization projects and would stop criticizing the political system – even if they would only do so temporarily. It worked partially as the progressivists did settle for the economic reforms for the time being at least. However, for other classes of society, the abrupt, western-based modernization meant a serious challenge, mainly the traditionalists; not only for the ulema but also for most of the tribal leaders of the country. As both the tribal system and religious life still had a huge influence over Saudi Arabia, it was inevitable that a foreign, unknown, forced economic development would cause tensions in the country. It is worth to note that Islam is not just a religion to the Saudi people (and for that matter to any other Arabs) but more like a system that incorporates nearly every aspects of life and which relies on the Quran, the hadith<sup>17</sup> and the sharia. The latter is highly important in the wahhabite Saudi Arabia. The increasing technological developments which followed the reforms meant a powerful challenge for the society; in most cases social changes and technological developments occur at the same time or the former sooner, but in Saudi Arabia it happened exactly the other way around. The different social groups responded differently to these changes. The same differentiation can be observed as with the case of the political reforms; the three main political groups had different approaches. Obviously, the most problems for the conservativists was caused by the appearance of new technologies (especially radio and television). However, Faisal realized that he (and the country) needs both modernization and the support of the religious classes in order to secure his rule and to be able to modernize Saudi Arabia. For this reason he handed over the control of many new technologies to the ulema (for example the administration of some television channels) who then accepted most of the changes. It was beneficial for both parties; Faisal ensured their support and in the meantime the ulema secured their influence on the population. A good example for this is that from the 1970s the religious scholars operate more than one television channels which concentrate on the spreading of Islamic morals and the doctrines of wahhabism.<sup>18</sup>

Faisal promised before his rise to power that he would make the administration more effective and would modernize the country's government in general and he kept his word. He started implementing these plans as early as 1962; the most important factor of them was the development of education in order to make sure that more trained experts would work in the then shaping modern, bureaucratic apparatus.

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<sup>17</sup> Its a collection of the life, teachings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad which came into being following the Prophet's death.

<sup>18</sup> Michel G. Nehme: *op. cit.* 1994. 633–634.; Michel G. Nehme: *op. cit.* 1987. 930–931, 936–939.

Faisal was earnest about the modernization of the education even though he knew that would cause conflicts between him and the ulema (more on the subject later). In favor of this modernization he asked for help from foreign countries, which he received from the western powers. By the year 1969 approximately 140 British teachers taught in the language center of Riyadh (in addition to the ARAMCO workers already stationed there and whose numbers were always changing) and it was planned that British teachers would work even in Saudi primary schools. An interesting fact that those teachers have been on the payroll of the United Kingdom and all costs concerning them was also paid by the British Ministry of Education, all in all more the 500.000 pounds (it is a question worth answering why Saudi Arabia didn't take part in the financing of these teachers). Willie Morris, British ambassador for Saudi Arabia, vigorously supported the idea to create more educational center beside the one in Riyadh (at least in Jeddah) where the Saudi youth can learn English, and even, if it is possible, to exercise in other cultural activities such as broadcasting radio and television shows. In addition he thought that it would be beneficial for the Saudi youth to create opportunities of entertainment for them in ways that are common for westerners (i.e. public libraries, cinemas, etc.). He added though that this in reality cannot happen in the near future but it might be achieved in the long run. Moreover, Morris made a proposal about Saudis studying in the United Kingdom at famous universities; this was unimaginable before.

Besides improving basic education, the development of higher education also got emphasized; by the end of 1960s two new universities were built in Saudi Arabia – King Saud the Second University in Riyadh in 1957 and the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. Additionally several research centers for numerous fields of research were constructed.<sup>19</sup>

The Saudi–British relation is especially interesting because in 1956 Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic connections with Great Britain and yet during the Kennedy era and the first two years of the Johnson administration the Saudis had a better relation with the British than with the United States (mainly because of Israel and the question of the Yemeni Civil War). A good indicator of this is that most official meetings between Kennedy and Faisal, although courteous and polite, were cold and distant, especially compared to the meetings during the Eisenhower administration. The Americans had to assure Faisal of their support over and over again.<sup>20</sup>

By modernizing the apparatus Faisal needed more and more clerks and so he created new workplaces too. The interesting fact about the new state officials is that the king has never hindered anyone who turned against him in 1960 so everyone who had a degree from a foreign university or a higher qualification from some domestic school could take part in the administration irrespectively of their political views. So indirectly he granted them a sort of amnesty and for this reason they could obtain more and more political influence which resulted in the traditionalists' drawing away from political decision-making. This, however, caused anomalous situations because most of the population still depended on the ulema for moral and everyday guidance, so the ulema still had a huge influence over the

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<sup>19</sup> The National Archives UK – Records of the British Council. BW 182/2 (piece). CL/SA.AR/680/1.

<sup>20</sup> Nadav Safran: *op. cit.* 96. and *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Volume XVIII. 1961–1963. Near East. Document number 71. and 165.

Saudis which gave them much power. The problem was that because of the strong modernization most of the alims started to get alienated, and slowly turned against Faisal and that meant a real threat to the king.<sup>21</sup>

After Faisal took over the throne in 1964 from his brother Saud, he established many new up-to-date, professional ministries and he appointed experts who were of university education to take the lead even though they were not (necessarily) tribal leaders or their immediate descendants; they could be mere "commoners". Of course this decision again neglected the conservativists' wish. In the meantime the progressivists could exploit the favorable atmosphere (at any rate favorable for them) of the economy; they have made a lot of investment mostly in the oil business, which was flourishing at the time anyway. It has to be noted though that in the regard of decision-making the most important ministries (like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Religion) was never lead by any of the "new ministers", because Faisal averted any attempt to hamper the full powers of the Saud family over the country. Thus Faisal could be considered as a devotee of modernization and at the same time he was vigorously conservative and till the end of his life he remained a king; most of the decisions concerning the country he made himself. Moreover, it is true that he supported the modernists, although, in matters that weren't vital for the development of Saudi Arabia (like the problem of education) he sought to make compromise with the ulema. In this way he made sure that the new "middle class" will not confront him since he allowed them the gain wealth and political influence; and at the same time he continued to cooperate with the ulema asking for their opinion on matters of state. As a result he obtained the support of the most influential groups of the country.<sup>22</sup>

During his reign Faisal has paid the most attention to the ulema in his internal politics; it was necessary because in the developing Saudi Arabia the alims opposed the king more and more. The main reason for this was not the technological improvements (although they played an important role) but the fact that with the appearance of the public, non-religious education the ulema started to lose its ideological influence and for the first time in their history were given a competition. This occurred because before the early 1960s the education meant solely the studying of the Quran, but in this period – thanks to the introduction of the public education system – many Saudis had the option to learn and there were more and more knowledge available for them as time passed by.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, many of the younger leading politicians studied abroad at reputable universities where they have contacted foreign ideologies and learned to speak English while the members of the ulema only spoke Arabic. Additionally, Faisal made it possible for women to receive the same education as man, even if they were segregated. This could have caused huge social tensions given the history and social system of Saudi Arabia. There was a good chance that the influence of the ulema would diminish, especially their effect on the Saudi youth, and that could have made the religious scholars to oppose Faisal and challenge his rule which would have ended catastrophically for the king, as the alims still had great impact over the masses. It should be noted that since the foundation of Saudi Arabia a dichotomy

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<sup>21</sup> Mordechai Abir: *op. cit.* 160–161.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem.* 154–157.

<sup>23</sup> Of course at that time the public education was not available for the masses and it was not compulsory. It only became general after the oil revenues increased during and after the first oil crisis in 1973.

characterizes the country; on the one hand the king gives the ulema authority over some political decisions and on everyday life and all matters of religion, on the other hand, the ulema legitimize the rule of the Saud family. By the end of the 1960s, this highly sensitive balance was threatened by the modernization. And yet, because of Faisal's political genius, no major changes happened to the status quo; the ulema slowly accepted the fact that they cannot hinder the development of the country but they can (at least partially) dictate the direction, this way they didn't lose neither their influence over the population nor the trust of the king.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1960s Saudi Arabia had to face some serious challenges and so it could not postpone the introduction of several reforms that was previously unimaginable for the country. Faisal's tenacious policy ensured that the Desert Kingdom was up to the challenges of the era. Although still pretty underdeveloped compared to western countries these years were the turning point that started Saudi Arabia on the way of becoming a modern state.

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<sup>24</sup> T.R. McHale: A Prospect of Saudi Arabia. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 56 (1980), Issue 4. 622–647.