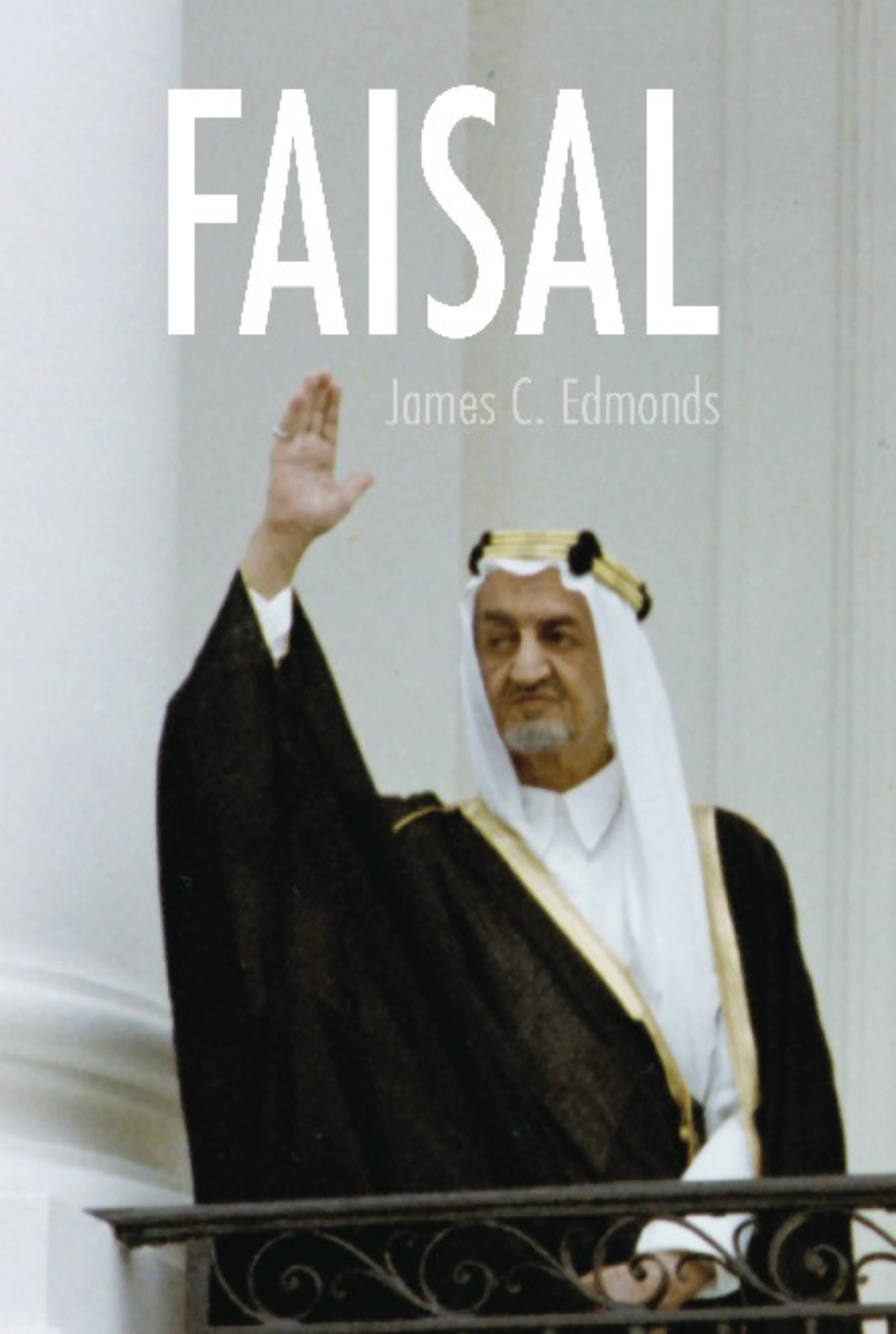
FAISAL

James C. Edmonds



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PREFACE

KING FAISAL bin Abdul Aziz was one of the most powerful, fascinating and complex figures of the last century. His reign marked Saudi Arabia's transition from feudal backwater to modern state; he was the principal architect of the Kingdom's oil-fueled leap – in one generation – from the 13th century to the 20th century, from abject poverty to fantastic wealth.

All who met Faisal remember being in the presence of a giant of a man. Austere and workaholic, with a deep spirituality underlying an inner calm, Faisal brought modernity to his nation without eroding its Islamic value system. Throughout the king was careful to move at a pace that his naturally conservative subjects could accept. Exercising power fully and working tirelessly, he reinvented his country, made Islam a force in world affairs and shocked the world with his momentous oil embargo in 1973.

Within a half-decade of Faisal's death Saudis would recall his reign as a golden age – a simpler time, when an infrastructure was built, welfare services established and hardliners in the religious establishment were kept in check; a time before the money became pervasive. The king remains a revered figure in the collective consciousness of all Saudis and his legacy remains relevant more than forty years later.

"There is not a single achievement being realized in this country that cannot be traced back to Faisal," his son Mohammed says.

It was not a golden age, of course, and the king was not perfect, but in many ways he proved to be irreplaceable. None of his successors possessed his stature, skill or gravitas. In the last three decades, the Kingdom's rulers have filled the void with an overdose of religion and Saudi Arabia and the world continue to suffer the consequences.

I found it inexplicable that three decades after his death there had been no proper, full-length portrait of this pivotal figure written in English. As I tend to

write books that I most wish to read – and because the story was so worth telling – I decided to do it myself.

At the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, I came across a dispatch written by Hermann Eilts, the American ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the mid-sixties. Eilts described repeatedly urging the king to write an autobiography or dictate his memoirs to tape for sometime in the future when they could be properly recorded. The king seemed pleased by the suggestion and told the ambassador he would consider it.

Others made similar proposals to Faisal over the years but his natural reticence and the fact that he had few moments for reflection ensured that he would never follow through. "If I told the truth in my memoirs," the king said on one occasion, "I would be left with no friends!"

Faisal's warning, I suspect, also describes the fate of anyone who writes of great men. Saudis, academics and members of the king's family may disagree with me, whether on key points or on minutiae. No one has a monopoly of wisdom about Faisal, or any other historical figure for that matter. His successes are here, as are his failures and contradictions; I believe that showing all of it enhances, rather than diminishes, his achievements. Such a portrait, "warts and all," is not in the Arab tradition.

One major difficulty in writing any life of Faisal is the fact that more research material is available for his last twenty years than the prolonged apprenticeship of his first fifty. As a result, he is a difficult man to do in the round. I have attempted to do so by weaving together a variety of threads – the reminiscences of family members, the memoirs of diplomats and oilmen, and recently declassified American and British government documents.

Faisal's was a life lived in public and he can only be explained in the context of the society in which he lived and the issues with which he dealt – the administration and the finance, the politics and the diplomacy. Events must be read forwards and the king's life naturally falls into three parts – the son of a king, the brother of another, and finally, as ruler himself.

Indeed the most honorable in the sight of God is the one who is most righteous among men

– *The Qur'an*, 49:13

BOOK ONE

The King's Son

(1905-1953)

ONE

AT NIGHT Riyadh emerges, as if from nowhere, from the absolute blackness of the desert. It is a vast and bustling metropolis. A bit like Las Vegas, it is a landscape of steel and glass, of neon and broad avenues, of Western shops and futuristic buildings. As the ultramodern capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh boasts a population of over five million spread over an area of 1,600 square kilometers. Nestled amidst the new are the ancient fortresses and mosques of the "old city"– a miniscule remnant of an earlier, poorer time. At the turn of the twentieth century, Riyadh was a small, fortified oasis town. In 1902, long before oil revenues made vast development possible, the town occupied an area of one square kilometer and was populated by a mere 8,000 people.

Riyadh sits at the heart of the Nejd, or "Highland," the vast central Arabian plateau. A hundred years ago, the town was a dense, labyrinthine collection of crenellated buildings, houses and mosques, and narrow, sandy streets surrounded by a defensive wall. Since these structures were constructed from the material available – local stone, mud-brick and wattle – the town's color took on the hue of the desert.

"The castellations gave it a warlike air," Briton Gerald De Gaury wrote. "When the early morning or evening sun threw shadows across them, the angles of the walls and towers seemed more solid and formidable than in the midday blaze." The mosques, with their low minarets, were a focal point of daily activity. Riyadhis prayed regularly, called to worship five times a day by the local muezzin.

Houses in Riyadh, most of them of only one level, were simply furnished and decorated. "The interiors of the houses," says De Gaury, "in the sandy lanes were decorated with gypsum, worked with a knife while still wet into leaf-like or floral patterns, and the ceiling beams were printed in geometrical designs, varied by circles and spots in red, black and blue. Persian rugs and grass matting…were almost the only furnishings."

The climate can be stifling on the arid Nejd, alleviated only by the sharp, rejuvenating desert air. Sandstorms were known to kill people and animals left out in the open. Winter brought bitterly cold winds sweeping down over the plateau, and the occasional fierce thunderstorm that swept through the gullies and carried away people or livestock that had been unable to escape. The mud buildings gave insulation against the extremes of the seasons. Life meant war against the elements. Death – by thirst, starvation, or disease – was ever-present.

The town stands in the Wadi Hanifa, a valley that spans much of central Arabia; its date-palm groves, fig trees and numerous springs supported the scattered villages. The magnificent camel, known as "the ship of the desert," was also an ample provider; they were used in battle, sold for currency, bore the burden of transport, and served as a source of both milk and meat.

The recitation of poetry – odes about both the travails and romance of life – helped to relieve the grimness of the fight for survival. Poetry was one of life's joys, as was the birth of a son – always an auspicious event in Arabia. The people, whether the nomadic bedouin, perpetually hovering in search of the best grazing for their camels and sheep, or the sedentary town folk, lived as their ancestors had, a millennia before. In a land of such extremes, Islam provided a source of inspiration, comfort and solace throughout life.

A future king, Faisal bin Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al-Saud, was born at Riyadh sometime in the autumn of 1905.

THE PROLOGUE TO Faisal's story was written in the eighteenth century with a zealous religious revivalist much like the Christian reformers of the sixteenth century. An Islamic Luther or Calvin, Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab believed Muslims of his time had gone astray. They smoked, wore luxurious clothes, sang and danced and venerated graves and domes, trees and caves associated with holy men. The puritanical preacher denounced such practices as polytheism.

The term "Wahhabism" has been frequently used, usually by its detractors, to label the preacher's revivalist movement. The movement's

followers reject that label since it implies they worship someone other than God; they preferred to call themselves muwahiddun (monotheists) and believed they were simply going back to the original Muslim way of life.

Known as the Teacher, Abdul Wahhab based his revival on the Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, the most strict and conservative of the four schools, which took its name from the ninth century scholar Ahmad bin Hanbal. Central to the revival was adherence to the doctrine of Tawhid, the essential "Oneness" of God. Seeking to purge Islam of false practices that had developed since the time of the Prophet Mohammed and return to the pure faith of Islam's earliest generations, Abdul Wahhab and his group of followers fought against music and smashed tombs. At first, his austere vision of Islam won little support.

Then in 1744 Ibn Abdul Wahhab met one of young Faisal's forebears, Amir Mohammed Ibn Saud, the ambitious ruler of the Nejdi oasis town of Dariyah. The two men made a pact: the Amir would rule according to the Qur'an and propagate the preacher's stern message and in return, Abdul Wahhab would give the ruler religious legitimacy. Their alliance marked the beginning of the first Saudi state (1744-1818) and was consolidated by the marriage of Mohammed Ibn Saud's eldest son to one of Abdul Wahhab's daughters. The preacher's descendants are called the Al-Sheikh, the people of the sheikh, and became the chief spiritual advisors of the royal family.

Given the centrality of religion in the Saudi state, the *ulema* – the teachers and interpreters of Islamic theology and law – continue to play a crucial role in providing religious legitimacy to the monarchy and wield huge influence in the social, educational and religious life of the country. This alliance, forged three centuries ago between a temporal monarchy and spiritual leaders, remains a primary source of Saudi political unity.

Saudi armies waged jihad to purify the peninsula and their domains soon stretched from Mecca to Bahrain. Under the banner of Tawhid, they had seized nearly all of the Nejd by the end of the eighteenth century. In 1801 the Saudis sacked the Shi'a holy city of Karbala (in modern-day Iraq) and destroyed the tombs of a number of Shi'a "saints," most notably that of Hussein, the

grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. They next turned west toward the Hijaz, flanking the vast interior along the Red Sea, and by 1806 they seized Mecca and Medina, the two holy cities of Islam. Within sixty years the Saudis had managed to become masters of most of the Arabian Peninsula.

Saudi expansion soon caught the attention of the Ottoman Empire. The Nejd was nominally an Ottoman *sanjak*, or province, and the Turks saw the Saudi seizure of the holy places as an affront. In 1811, the Ottoman sultan ordered his viceroy in Egypt, Mohammed Ali, to send an expedition against the desert upstarts.

By 1818 the viceroy's son, Ibrahim Pasha, had reached the Nejd and captured the Saudi capital of Dariyah. The town was laid waste and its date groves cut down. Ibrahim sent the Saudi ruler, Amir Abdullah bin Saud Al-Saud, to Constantinople where he was later beheaded. Dariyah was never fully reoccupied.

After the Egyptians withdrew from Arabia in 1822, Amir Turki bin Abdullah Al-Saud – a grandson of Mohammed Ibn Saud – reestablished his family's rule, setting up a new capital in Riyadh, a dozen miles down the Wadi Hanifa. Under Turki's son, Amir Faisal bin Turki, the House of Saud reached the apogee of its power in the nineteenth century, extending their power over much of central and eastern Arabia and laying claim to the Buraimi Oasis on the frontier with Oman. After his death in 1865, intra-family divisions led to the dismantlement of the Saudi state.

Faisal bin Turki's two eldest sons, Abdullah and Saud, battled for control of the state for the next twenty years. The Ottomans took advantage of this squabbling to reduce Saudi power. In 1871, they recaptured the eastern province of Al-Hasa, along the Persian Gulf coast. To crush the Saudi "vermin" the Turks gave their support to Mohammed Ibn Rasheed, the ruler of Hail – north of Riyadh on the edge of the Great Nafud desert.

The Saudi state fell in 1887 when the Rasheeds captured Riyadh. Abdul Rahman bin Faisal, a brother of Abdullah and Saud, was left as the governor of Riyadh at the pleasure of his enemies. After an abortive uprising in 1891,

Abdul Rahman and his family went into exile. At no time was the dynasty's future more in doubt.

TRAVELING IN a bag slung over one of Abdul Rahman's camels was his eleven year old son Abdul Aziz; in another bag, Abdul Aziz's sister Nura, a year older. The exiles lived for many months among the al-Murra tribe, bedouin tribesmen living on the edge of the vast southern desert, the Rub al-Khali or Empty Quarter. Abdul Aziz would later say that his deep love of the desert had come from his time among the al-Murra.

Eventually they found refuge in Kuwait, ruled by Mubarak Al-Sabah, called "the Great." As Abdul Aziz grew toward manhood, he received a traditional education in the arts of chivalry, horsemanship and warfare. He read little besides the Qur'an and was a deeply pious, assiduous student of his faith. While in Kuwait Abdul Aziz was a regular attendee at Mubarak's daily *majlis*, or sitting, where a ruler heard the grievances of his subjects and received their petitions. It was here that Abdul Aziz witnessed at first hand the arts of daily government and international politics.

The handsome prince married for the first time at the age of fifteen, but his young bride died within a matter of months. At eighteen he married again, to Wadhba of the Bani Khaled tribe. She bore Abdul Aziz his first born, a son named Turki in 1900 and a second named Saud in 1902.

Restless and pained by his family's situation, Abdul Aziz led occasional raids against the Rasheeds, who by the turn of the century had fallen into a pattern of fierce internecine strife after the death of Mohammed Ibn Rasheed in 1897. Confident that the Rasheeds' grip on power slipping, Abdul Aziz set out south from Kuwait in 1901 with a small group of followers in a bold attempt to recover the land of his forefathers. After spending several months on the fringes of he Rub al-Khali gathering tribal support, Abdul Aziz and his men made their way to Riyadh. In the early morning hours of January 15, 1902 they slipped over the town's walls under the cover of darkness.

The town was completely dark, its populace asleep. The Rasheed overseer, Ajlan, slept in the Masmak fort in the heart of town; Abdul Aziz learned that

Ajlan was protected by a garrison but emerged every morning after the sunrise. Hiding in a private house near the fortress Abdul Aziz and his men bid their time sleeping and praying until dawn. Accompanying him in the assault party were his cousins, the half-brothers Abdullah Ibn Jiluwi and Abdul Aziz Ibn Musa'id. As the dark desert sky began to lighten, Abdul Aziz readied his men for battle.

Soon the gates of the fortress opened, and as Ajlan emerged with his bodyguards, Abdul Aziz and his men sprang to the attack. Abdul Aziz aimed his rifle, fired at the governor and missed. As Ajlan attempted to retreat inside the fortress both sides attempted to pull him through the wooden gate. Abdullah Ibn Jiluwi hurled his spear at Ajlan; the spear slammed into the gate where the steel point remained embedded until removed in the 1970s.

Eventually Ajlan's men pulled him inside the fortress and, as they did, Ibn Jiluwi forced his way in and slew him. With that, the brief fight concluded and, as the sun was rising over the desert, Abdul Aziz and his men took possession of the fortress. Standing on the battlements, Abdul Aziz threw Ajlan's severed head down to the crowd gathering in the street.

Those enemy soldiers not killed quickly surrendered. The people welcomed Abdul Aziz joyfully and that afternoon he led the people of Riyadh in prayer. The people swore the traditional *bay'ah*, or oath of allegiance, to him.

Knowing his situation was precarious Abdul Aziz immediately ordered the town's high earthen walls to be repaired and strengthened in preparation for a Rasheedi counterattack; the townspeople did so eagerly over the following month. His brother Sa'ad soon came from Kuwait with a small detachment of reinforcements. His father, Abdul Rahman, arrived at Riyadh in May 1902 with his wives and younger children.

Abdul Aziz gathered the town's religious and notables and urged them to pledge their loyalty to his father. Abdul Rahman refused firmly telling his son, "You captured it. You keep it." Acknowledging his son's talents and abilities, he agreed that Abdul Aziz would be the Amir, retaining the title of imam for himself and remaining the ultimate head of the family until his death in 1928.

Abdul Aziz's gamble was a complete success. His bold raid captured the imagination of the Nejdis and has since passed into the realm of legend. The story has been told and retold countless times and, as often happens with such stories, the details conflict with each telling. His seizure of Riyadh demonstrated that he possessed the qualities a ruler should have – bravery, good fortune and a talent for leading men.

Abdul Aziz's achievement decisively revived the fortunes of the House of Saud. Though he had many years of arduous campaigning ahead of him, he had taken the first step toward forging a kingdom that would encompass the greater part of the Arabian Peninsula.

ABDUL AZIZ'S RECAPTURE of Riyadh in January 1902 marked the foundation of the third Saudi state, the country that exists to this day. The ordinary citizens welcomed him and the merchants lent him money but Riyadh's religious leaders were skeptical. The *ulema* questioned whether the twenty-two year old possessed the piety necessary to rule. He had grown to manhood in neighboring Kuwait, which they regarded as the regional fleshpot.

To show his commitment to the old alliance between the House of Saud and the faith of Ibn Abdul Wahhab, the new Amir of Riyadh soon took a new wife. Her name was Tarfah, the daughter of the town's chief qadi, or judge, Sheikh Abdullah ibn Abdul Lateef Al-Sheikh. She was a direct descendant of the Teacher. He also entrusted the *ulema* with the responsibility for law and morality in the town. As with the states of his forebears, the cornerstone of Abdul Aziz's realm was the alliance between religious and royal, between mosque and state.

Tarfah moved into her husband's mud palace next to the grand mosque. Within a year or two, she bore a frail, dark-haired little boy whom Abdul Aziz named Faisal, "the Sword." He was Abdul Aziz's third son and the first born to him since retaking Riyadh. Records were not kept in this era so Faisal's exact date of birth remains uncertain.

"We were a primitive society at that time," says Prince Mohammed Al-Faisal. "They say he was born "when the great rains came" you know, or something like that. But it's between 1902 and 1905."

Surrounded on three sides by the harsh vastness of the desert and on the fourth by steppes where bedouin grazed their flocks, the Nejd was shut off from the outside world. The people were puritan and xenophobic. In order to reach Riyadh, or the other towns of central Arabia, a traveler would have to traverse hundreds of miles of hostile desert wilderness; few travelers dared to try. In fact, only three Europeans (all Englishmen) succeeded in reaching Riyadh during the nineteenth century. The town's only contact with the outside was the rare merchant's caravan.

Though only a century had passed, it is difficult to imagine what life would have been like when Faisal was a boy. Life in Riyadh was narrow. The future king grew up in circumstances that were primitive by European standards: without indoor plumbing, electricity or refrigeration, mobility by donkey, camel or horse. There was no press, radio, telegraph let alone motor cars or aircraft; Faisal was not to see such things until he was a teenager.

Tarfah died while Faisal was still a baby; in what would have a far-reaching effect on Faisal's upbringing and later life, he would be raised in the household of his maternal grandparents. Sheikh Abdullah – who had been Abdul Aziz's childhood Qur'an instructor – took charge of his grandson's daily instruction in religious doctrine and law. The boy grew up in his grandfather's old mud house, with separate quarters for women and men. With no full brothers, Faisal grew up in relative isolation.

Under his tutelage, Faisal was taught to read and write, memorizing the Qur'an by the age of ten. He also studied the Hadith, the sayings and acts of the Prophet, and composed and recited poetry. The experience of living in the household of religious elders gave the young boy firsthand knowledge of how the *ulema* took decisions. Faisal excelled thoroughly in his studies; his religious education left a deep imprint on his character, perceptions and his worldview.

Between the calls to prayer and his lessons, Faisal, his hair in plaited ringlets, would join his brothers and the other boys at play in Riyadh's dusty

courtyards. Gerald De Gaury notes that that the children of Riyadh enjoyed "greater freedom than usual elsewhere."

"For a time they were permitted to run and play with restraint, dressed in a single shirt, barefoot and bareheaded, the girls unveiled, the boys with long hair. As the boys grew a little older they learnt to use a small sling, to play a kind of marbles, to trap birds, to ape falconry with sparrow-hawks, and, great day, at the age of five or six, be mounted on a mare."

From the elder boys Faisal learned horsemanship, desert lore, how to handle weapons, how to hunt, and track the stars in the desert. Unlike his vigorous father and elder brothers, Faisal was a sickly, thin youth. Health problems would plague him throughout his life. What he lacked in stamina he made up for with his sharp mind and courage. Faisal's closest companions in childhood included his Fahd, a brother of the same age and his slightly older uncle Abdullah bin Abdul Rahman. A third was Murzouq, a black boy who served as Faisal's *khuwiya*, or bodyguard. Murzouq went with Faisal everywhere and remained devoted to him throughout his life.

Though Abdul Aziz was often tending to public affairs or absent from Riyadh on campaign he would occasionally "send for Faisal and play with him, as he did with all his sons when small. Later he would take him out with him on some small excursion, on a hot evening to sit in the cool tunnel of a high pierced rock outside Riyadh or into the gardens of the Wadi Hanifa for a picnic." Finally, at the age of ten or eleven he moved from the home of his grandparents to the house of his father.

Many years later when American Hermann Eilts asked Faisal to whom he owed his knowledge of politics and statecraft, he unhesitatingly replied, "To my father. I have not received formal education in school, but I was brought up under the direct influence and guidance of my father, and I have tried to follow in his footsteps." Faisal spent long hours sitting quietly in his father's *majlis*, listening carefully as the discussion flowed, watching how Abdul Aziz handled tribal leaders and religious sheikhs. This functioned as a sort of finishing school for the young prince. From Abdul Aziz he learnt the tactics of desert warfare and the ways of the tribes, as well as patience and discretion.

For more than half of his life Faisal would live in the shadow of his legendary father. The nation Faisal would inherit did not yet exist. Abdul Aziz had just begun to assemble the pieces when the prince was born; the story of his early life is inextricably linked with the creation of what would be called Saudi Arabia. At first an observer, Faisal would soon help to both expand and govern his father's realm. Indeed, Faisal's story would never have been possible without Abdul Aziz – one of the last great nation-builders.

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