PRAGMATIST, CONSERVATIVE, OR REFORMER?
UNITED STATES PERCEPTIONS OF FUTURE SAUDI LEADERS

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ABSTRACT
The United States pays great attention to succession in the Kingdom and attempts to predict the way in which a future ruler may diverge from the policies of his predecessor. This fixation on the king and his successor demonstrates some important misconceptions about Saudi Arabia’s government. This paper discusses groups and individuals, other than the king, within the Saudi system, who play a role in shaping Saudi policy. It then examines United States predictions of how Saudi crown princes’ would act as king to see if these assessments proved accurate. In doing so, I argue that judgments of Saudi crown princes’ behavior have little to do with their policies once they are king. Therefore, the king’s perceived personality is irrelevant in predicting Saudi foreign policy.
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Introduction:

“The relationship between the two countries is unique among all our international relationships. There is no country...in the world in which we have this particular type of relationship. Although it is not possible to view relations between countries as between individuals, nevertheless our relationship is stronger than could be defined by formal contracts or treaties, since it arises from the genuine personal friendships between our respective peoples... Our relations with Saudi Arabia are founded on strong human relationships, personal relationships between our leaders.”

-George McGhee, Assistant Secretary of Near East Affairs, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 1950

This extract from a 1950 discussion in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, among American embassy bureaucrats and Saudi officials highlights the American understanding of the United States-Saudi relationship. After emphasizing the importance of personal relationships, assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs McGhee articulated United States interests in the region, emphasizing the centrality of oil. Among the Saudi officials present was Prince Faisal bin Abdulaziz, then Foreign Minister, and expected to become king. For McGhee and the other Americans, Faisal’s presence was crucial since the United States was interested in how King Abdulaziz’s successor would rule.

The United States pays great attention to succession in the Kingdom and attempts to predict the way in which a future ruler may diverge from the policies of his predecessor. This fixation on the
king and his successor demonstrates some important misconceptions about Saudi Arabia’s government. This paper discusses groups and individuals, other than the king, within the Saudi system, who play a role in shaping Saudi policy. It then examines United States predictions of how Saudi crown princes’ would act as king to see if these assessments proved accurate. In doing so, I argue that judgments of Saudi crown princes’ behavior have little to do with their policies once they are king. Therefore, the king’s perceived personality is irrelevant in predicting Saudi foreign policy. Ultimately, though the United States continues to refer to the US-Saudi relationship as one between individuals, the relationship is defined by a set of interests, which change over time irrespective of who is in power. Though succession is not the only issue of importance in Saudi Arabia, this paper looks at the United States’ assumptions and understandings of the kingdom through the lens of succession. For this reason I ask the question “have past assessments of crown princes been accurate predictors of changes in Saudi foreign policy?” This paper analyses what changes U.S policymakers predicted as they contemplated a new Saudi ruler. Rather than focus upon the mechanisms of succession, my focus is on how the policies of one king differed from those of his predecessor. The nature of succession in the kingdom, in so far as how a king is deemed fit to govern, is explained when succession does not pass directly to the next in line.

Understanding the limitations of predicting policy changes as a result of succession is important because the United States’ strategic interests in the region are directly linked to Saudi Arabia and its foreign policy. These interests are explored in detail in the literature review. If this paper finds
that Saudi policy does not change considerably under different Saudi kings, then the United States need not spend so much time on the analysis of a crown prince’s behaviour.

Because there are distinct shifts in US concerns and priorities over time, the paper will not focus on specific areas of foreign policy. For example, since the Cold War, the United States’ concerns have shifted from containing communism, towards combating Islamic militancy. Instead, what is examined is how government agencies and the American media expected each new king to behave, compared to how these anticipations matched actual events. Undoubtedly, there is some discrepancy in the way events are predicted, and this is accounted for in the analysis.

Four successions are examined:

- King Saud (November 1953-November 1964) to King Faisal
- Faisal (November 1964-March 1975) to Khalid
- Khalid (March 1975 – June 1982) to Fahad
- Fahad (June 1982 – August 2005) to Abdullah

The last set of dates requires an explanation. Although King Abdullah has been king since the death of King Fahad, he actually acted as King since 1995 due to Fahad’s deteriorating health. The only other succession, from King Abdulaziz, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, to his son
King Saud, is not examined as it was fundamentally different from subsequent successions in which rule went from brother to brother.

Declassified US government documents relevant to the crown prince in each specific time frame provide the main source of data. In particular, the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series is an excellent source of data through King Khalid’s reign. Most relevant are communications from United States embassies and consulates in the region to the State Department as well as transcripts of conversations between Saudi and American officials. Since documents after King Khalid’s reign time remain classified for the most part, I rely upon congressional hearings as well as media sources for analysis of more recent successions.

**Succession and the Analysts**

There are two pertinent literatures on Saudi Arabia. The first deals with succession in the kingdom; and the second discusses the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. The first explains the processes of succession well, while outlining how Saudi foreign policy has changed over the years.\(^a\) This literature also explains the role of other government bodies and constituencies within the country, while covering the period from the start of the US-Saudi relationship in the 1930’s to the present. The most comprehensive accounts include *Succession in

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**Saudi Arabia** by Joseph Kechichian, and *Inside the Mirage: America’s Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia* by Thomas Lippmann. The second body of literature on the US-Saudi relationship sees succession as the most important event and thus predicts a sea change in policies between different kings. A more detailed discussion of other groups within the kingdom which play a role in shaping policy is given in the literature on succession, but this same literature fails to link the multiple power loci in Saudi society to the issue of succession. In other words, succession is but one aspect of Saudi political life and if the claims made in this paper are correct, not necessarily the most salient.

It is essential to understand the way in which succession takes place in Saudi Arabia in order to understand the way in which Saudi Arabia deals with issues which are important to the United States. Joseph Kechichian, in his seminal work *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, successfully covers the history of succession in the kingdom through 2000. He explains the fact that when King Abdulaziz died, rule was passed directly to his eldest son and subsequently, with one exception, it has gone from brother to brother in line with seniority. The fact that Prince Mohammed was bypassed in favour of his more suitable brother Khalid, as well as the importance Prince Faisal placed on consensus in deciding when to take power from his brother Saud, highlights some of the problems in predicting rulers based on a presupposed set of interests. Both the succession to Khalid and the perceived power struggle between Faisal and Saud are discussed later in the paper.
In addition to explaining the way in which succession takes place, Kechichian gives a remarkably comprehensive overview of the successions to date, focusing on perceptions of secularism and religious objectives within the Kingdom.\textsuperscript{b} He also explains the way in which policymaking is the upshot of interactions among different groups within the Kingdom. He further demonstrates that though ultimate power rests with the King, because of powerful senior princes and their spheres of influence, policies are dictated by consensus rather than one individual’s personal whim. When it comes to the understanding the United States has of the kingdom, and therefore its ability to predict changes within it, Kechichian does not comment. However, the fact that many questions with regard to the future of succession in the kingdom are left unanswered (such as how succession will move to the next generation of princes) by Kechichian demonstrates the difficulties an outsider has in understanding the intricacies of succession in the kingdom.

Succession in Saudi Arabia is important in light of the strategic importance of Saudi Arabia to United States interests in the Middle East. The most notable is Saudi Arabia’s significance with regard to energy security, which is discussed by Thomas Lipmann in \textit{Inside the Mirage: America’s fragile partnership with Saudi Arabia}.\textsuperscript{c} Indeed, the US-Saudi relationship was originally founded on America’s interests in gaining access to Saudi oil and the first Saudi oil concession was given to a US company in 1933, just one year after the modern Kingdom’s

\textsuperscript{b} Joseph A. Kechichian, \textit{Succession in Saudi Arabia} (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pg. #19

Since then, the relationship has grown to encompass other issues including Saudi Arabia’s roles in the Arab-Israeli conflict; containing communism; and most recently, stopping Islamic militancy. Lippman’s focus on terrorism is secondary to the importance he places on oil, but Daryl Champion pays particular attention to Islamic militancy in his book *The Paradoxical Kingdom* in which he discusses the fact that in recent years militant Islam has increased within the kingdom. Through his narrative one can see directly the effects of Islamic militancy on US-Saudi relations. The issue of succession as it relates to the different ways that terrorism is combatted in the kingdom is not his focus and in this, his analysis is lacking. However he does focus on acts of terror which have had direct effects on US interests, including the 1996 Khobar Bombings and the September 11th attacks. These issues have been the cause of the most recent strains in the bond between the United States and Saudi Arabia and the strategies of each different king in combating militant Islam is an area of immense importance.

Some of the constituencies which the Saudi leadership needs to satisfy are discussed in the literature on succession. This helps to explain the internal constraints on royal action. In doing so it highlights the extent to which it is questionable that the individual dispositions of Saudi kings affect Saudi foreign policy directly. While some argue that the opinions of the respective crown princes will be a considerable factor in either strengthening or weakening the United States partnership, there is evidence to suggest that predictions of Saudi changes are rarely correct.

In order better to understand these constituencies and how the leadership interacts with them, an overview of the Saudi political structure and nature of governance is necessary. It will help to explain why a reliance on the judgments of individuals’ behaviour is not paramount to understanding foreign policy. Though the difficulty of predicting rulers’ attitudes is obviously not limited to Saudi Arabia, the reason it is such a difficult task in regard to the kingdom stems from a relatively narrow understanding of the workings of the Kingdom’s political system and a failure to understand how institutions modify behaviour.

Though much has been published on the kingdom, the earliest detailed analysis by Robert Lacey was not published until 1981. Since then the country has opened up somewhat and accessing information is easier. Nevertheless, with much of the law not yet codified, many factors are difficult to understand without direct access to the kingdom.

An examination of some of the important groups in the Saudi Arabia will give context to the succession question: The basic law of governance outlines the role of the king and the rudimentary principles behind the succession. The king can only come from the sons of the country’s founder, King Abdulaziz al-Saud (known in the United States as ibn Saud,) and his grandchildren. As the sons of Abdulaziz are all above 65 years old, a pertinent issue is how to move succession to the next generation – this will not happen until after at least the next two

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kings. The king is chosen from within the brothers and the Ulema, discussed below, must then approve his appointment.

The basic law of governance, as explained by Madawai al-Rasheed in her article, “God, the King and the Nation: Political Rhetoric in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s” serves to “make explicit what has always been implicit in Saudi politics,” namely, the monarchical system of government and the nature of succession. It was noted that the United States government “publically endorsed the reforms without any reservations” seeming to suggest that the United States backs the monarchy and that the institutionalization of succession was not met by fears from the US.

The Ulema is a group of religious scholars which serves in an advisory role to the king. It is a relatively autonomous body which functions as representative of what some scholars refer to as “the religious establishment” in the Kingdom. In fact, the relationship between the House of Saud and the more conservative religious elements in the country is the topic of much discussion and helps to explain why policies both domestically and internationally do not change considerably over short periods of time. The royal family, and the king in particular, plays a delicate balancing act between satisfying those in the population who favour modernization and reform, and assuaging those who think the country has already undergone too much change in said direction.

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8 Madawi Al-Rasheed, "God, the King and the Nation: Political Rhetoric in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 3 (1996): pg. #363
9 Madawi Al-Rasheed, "God, the King and the Nation: Political Rhetoric in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 3 (1996): pg. #364
In addition to the Ulema, the Council of Ministers and the Shura Council also play a role in the political process. The former is a group of twenty-two ministers presided over by the king (who is also prime minister.) As outlined by the Law of the Council of Ministers, the cabinet “shall draw up the internal, external, financial, economic, educational and defence policies as well as general affairs of state and shall supervise their implementation. It shall also review the resolutions of the Shura Council. It has the executive power and is the final authority in financial and administrative affairs of all ministries and other government institutions.”

The Shura Council is a hundred and fifty member appointed body whose role is as a consultative council. In keeping with principles of Islamic law (sharia) of the need for consultation and consensus, this body is consulted by the king on any major decision. However, while it can make proposals, unlike the Council of Ministers, it has no legislative power.

Conclusions drawn in the literature on the future of US-Saudi relations are not always accurate because it does not draw links between other constituencies and Saudi-US policy. These differences are interesting and help to explain US policymakers’ sometimes misguided

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predictions. The fact that the kings and their crown princes are compared to one another in much of the literature indicates that similar judgments could have been made by policymakers.

For example, Kechichian juxtaposes what he regards as a “corrupt” King Saud against a more reformist and politically savvy Prince Faisal, outlining the nature of the feud which developed between the two brothers;¹ an important episode which did much to define the role of other constituencies in the kingdom and the importance consensus holds in Saudi politics. By presenting King Saud and Prince Faisal in such opposing lights, Kechichian presents an opinion that Faisal would be a better King not only for Saudi Arabia, but for the West as well. This paper shows later that this opinion was widespread in American diplomatic circles.

Kechichian’s book on succession does not focus on the respective reigns of each king. This is important for identifying differences between expected changes and reality. The gap between expectations and reality is filled by Robert Lacey in his book “The Kingdom” in which he gives a detailed account of the 1973 oil embargo in which King Faisal used the oil weapon against the United States. This episode demonstrates the fact that though the United States expected Faisal to be a more western-friendly king than Saud, he turned out to be the only one whose actions directly hurt the United States.²

¹Joseph A. Kechichian, Succession in Saudi Arabia (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pg. # 40
Such differing assessments of royals within the literature are of particular relevance to this paper. These assessments give background to some of the ways in which crown princes were depicted; for example, in *The Coming Storm*, Peter Wilson and Douglas Graham talk of Faisal as “not a completely altruistic reformer”\(^n\) who “developed a police state.” More importantly, in regard to what this meant for relations with the United States and what had been expected, Wilson and Graham note that this ran counter to his promises to Kennedy to pursue democracy, thus demonstrating that what the United States thought it could expect from a Saudi king, was not necessarily what it got.\(^o\)

The lack of extensive discussion on King Khalid prior to his reign is largely due to the unexpected assassination of King Faisal. Scholarly opinions and expectations of him were varied. Robert Lacey wrote that the “world decided that Khalid was a stop-gap monarch, chosen to mark the time until the accession of the more forceful Fahad.”\(^p\) However, he also said that King Khalid proved “on occasion the very opposite of what was expected of him.”\(^q\)

Where the secondary literature is most helpful is in its discussion of Crown Prince Abdullah as it helps make up for the lack of accessible US government documents on him while still crown prince. The analysis of Crown Prince Abdullah is the most detailed amongst those covered in the

\(^q\) Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), pg. # 431
literature and several suggestions as to what was expected of him are offered. The most extensive of these analyses was presented by Simon Henderson in *After King Fahad* in which he focused his attention on the probability that Abdullah would take over. He argued that if that were to happen, there would “be a crisis in government.” He further claimed that Prince Abdullah was viewed as anti-American and that this could damage US-Saudi relations.

Refuting this idea, in his 2009 publication, Robert Lacey explains this perceived difference between Fahad and Abdullah with the advantage of hindsight saying that Abdullah constructed a double identity just as Fahad did, thus better enabling him to reform while still maintaining the support and legitimacy that comes from a focus on Islamic principles and conservatism. As is discussed later in this paper, the importance of religion and the role that religious authorities play in Saudi Arabia is something that must be taken into account by Saudi rulers.

The fact that United States policy makers sometimes misjudged future Saudi rulers is further demonstrated in the Middle East Research and Information Project report entitled *Saudi Arabia on the Brink*. Published in 1980, it talks of an incident early that year when a CIA analyst spoke to two reporters telling them that the agency had warned the Carter administration of the Saudi regime’s fragility. Furthermore, the analyst said that the agency had expected that Crown Prince

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Fahad could be replaced by Prince Abdullah who was described as “a tough ultra-nationalist.” In a similar manner, Simon Henderson projected that the positive relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia as witnessed under King Fahad would not be repeated.\(^1\) Looking at the US-Saudi relationship since King Fahad one can see that this was not the case, as is discussed later in the paper.

**What is missing in the secondary literature?**

The literature on royal succession in Saudi Arabia is useful to gain understanding of the basic process. It also helps to demonstrate the point of asking the question as to whether the United States has accurately judged Saudi crown princes and thus successfully determined changes in foreign policy as a result. The fact that there are differing opinions of princes within the literature serves to suggest that similar differing opinions may exist among policy makers. Where the literature is lacking is in any real analysis of United States government perceptions of crown princes compared to the realities of their reign. In other words, little attention has been given as to whether predictions of how princes will govern have proved correct. Such an analysis is important to the field because it would help to determine how much weight should be given to those who fear that the next in line would represent a significant departure from King Abdullah’s policies.

\(^1\) Joe Stork, *Saudi Arabia on the Brink* (Washington, D.C.: Project, 1980), pg. # 29
From crown prince to king:

The conversation cited at the start of this paper took place over fifty years ago. It nonetheless encompasses much of what the United States continues to view as important in its relationship with Saudi Arabia. The relationships between US presidents and Saudi kings was, and remains, extremely important. This belief helps to explain why there is such apprehension over who the next Saudi king will be. By looking at what was being said about crown princes prior to their accession to the throne, compared to how they subsequently governed, I show that though the relationship between the King of Saudi Arabia and the President of the United States is important, Saudi foreign policy is not shaped by it, nor can one predict changes as a result of a succession.

Faisal:

In the build up to Prince Faisal’s accession there was much talk in the United States as to his outlook and what it meant for US-Saudi relations. Judgments of him were generally positive, and opinions of him are documented as early as 1952 when it was still unclear as to how succession would take place in the kingdom. A 20th of December 1952 telegram from the American ambassador in Saudi Arabia stated that American officials were “favourably impressed by
Faisal.” The issues most regularly commented on were Saudi Arabia’s role in containing communism and its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The difference between Saudi and US perceptions of these two issues demonstrates the apparent lack of US understanding and acceptance of the Saudi stance.

These misunderstandings contributed to the United States’ continual expectation of a change in Saudi policy with the coming of each new king. For example, in 1953, President Eisenhower met with Prince Faisal and argued that it was in the kingdom’s interests to prevent the spread of “godless communism;” a sentiment with which Prince Faisal was in “full agreement.” Later, in 1957 this sentiment was reiterated in another conversation where the prince observed that “The Saudi Arabian Government strongly opposed the Soviet Union having a base in the area.” The importance of the Soviet issue is relevant when it is compared to the matter of Israel. Saudi Arabia did indeed take issue with communism, and would oppose the Soviet Union having influence in the Middle East, but this objection came second to Saudi Arabia’s preoccupation with Israel; a matter which influenced much of Saudi foreign policy during Faisal’s reign.

Indeed, considering the amount of documentation on Prince Faisal’s attitudes to Israel, it is surprising how little the United States seemed to understand the Saudi point of view. On countless occasions Prince Faisal made Saudi Arabia’s views on the matter very clear and yet

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there continued to be examples of the United States either ignoring, or not understanding what
the prince said. One such example was seen in a meeting between the Saudi ambassador to the
United States, Asad al-Faqih and Near East Affairs secretary Allen, in which the latter expressed
his and his associates’ “surprise and disquiet over recent bitter anti-US remarks attributed to
Prince Faisal”.\(^\text{x}\) When the Ambassador explained that they were not doubt in connection to US
policies towards Israel, Allen seemed surprised that the Prince should feel such animosity
towards US-Israeli relations. It is odd that this surprise should be felt considering the very direct
remarks the Prince had made on the matter previously. Indeed it was this conversation that most
clearly shows the discrepancy in what the US and Saudi deem important.

In a telling exchange between the Prince and the President, the former said that Israel was the
greatest threat to Saudi Arabia, to which The President responded that the Soviet Union was the
greatest threat to the world. Prince Faisal reiterated that though he too saw the Soviet Union as a
threat, Israel remained the greatest menace to Saudi Arabia. The president said he understood
this, but that there was a “big difference between Israel and international communism.”\(^\text{z}\) The
Prince answered that though communism was an international threat “the closer danger was first
in the Arab mind.” This difference of outlook mattered because of the expectation that came with
it on the part of the United States with regard to events unfolding and the actions of Prince Faisal
in response to them. The United States’ conclusions were that Saudi Arabia was starkly opposed
to communism and would thus conduct its foreign policy in line with these beliefs. Though this

was the case to a certain extent, what the United States did not fully appreciate was the greater opposition to Israel – a sentiment which continued among all the Saudi kings contrary to US expectations of change.

America’s expectations that anti-Israeli sentiments would be ameliorated by Faisal were shown in the advice given in response to a quote by King Saud. After King Saud’s statement of “if (Israel) lives, we cannot live. We can never have peace with Israel,” the US Embassy in Saudi Arabia suggested that to circumvent these types of ideas, the US should request “audience with Prince Faisal who better understands western mentality.” Such a statement demonstrates the lack of recognition on the part of US diplomats that on matters such as the relationship with Israel, there is very little departure between different Saudi rulers. It may be true that actions taken change over time, but this is due more to the changing geopolitical climate rather than a change in attitude. Indeed, for all that Prince Faisal “understands western mentality” it did not change his views on Israel, which were unequivocal: “It is impossible for Jews and Arabs to live side by side as neighbours… if they had established a state elsewhere, Arabs would have been first to recognize it; but Arabs can never forget or accept (the)injustice of (the)establishment (of a) Jewish state in their land.” It is worth noting that Prince Faisal was astonished by the American’s lack of understanding of his position on the matter. The Prince was recorded as

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saying “we can never live with Israel. Will Americans never understand this fact; nothing they can do will change it.”

A 1958 national intelligence estimate looked at the possible implications of governmental changes in Saudi Arabia. It is interesting to note that the estimate correctly recognizes that “the fundamental outlook of the governing class” had not significantly changed. With regard to Saudi Arabia’s relationship to the pan-Arabist states, the estimate predicted that relations would improve and saw that this was a threat to the United States’ interests in the region because of Nasser’s attitude towards communism. This did not prove to be the case. Saudi Arabia remained starkly opposed to communism as a concept, and afraid of pan-Arabism as it affected Saudi interests. This passionate anti-pan-Arabist sentiment was demonstrated in the Yemen proxy war which Saudi Arabia was engaged. That being said, alliances with other Arab states against Israel, no matter how much the former flirted with socialist ideas, were of paramount interest to Saudi foreign policy during this period.

In this way one can see that a perceivably more western minded crown prince does not necessarily translate into a pro-US King. In a cable from the Acting Director of Central Intelligence on “significant developments affecting U.S security,” Faisal’s attitude in 1958 was characterized as having “taken a noticeably harsher line towards the U.S.” The director expressed fears of Saudi Arabia’s possible “curtailing of Aramco’s existing rights as well as

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e United States., Dept. of State., *FRUS, 1958-60*, vol. XII (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of State, 1993), pg. #726
possible improvement in Saudi Arabia’s relations with the USSR and UAR.” This assessment of Faisal differs considerably from that which prevailed in earlier years; again demonstrating the difficulties of predicting the actions of a Saudi ruler. The United States viewed Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy through the lens of what most concerned the US at the time. In other words, when communism was the greatest threat, the United States focused on Saudi attitudes towards communism, paying less attention to issues which concerned Saudi Arabia, which was ultimately extremely detrimental to their relationship.

Indeed, this fixation on communism and Saudi Arabia’s attitudes towards it drew America’s attention away from the realities of Arab-Israeli issues as the United States expected Saudi and US interests in the region to align. President Nixon believed Faisal would support the US no matter what took place. He said “Whatever we do on the Middle East – whether he (Faisal) likes it or doesn’t like it – he will support us.” This statement was made in 1971 just two years before the King used the oil weapon against the United States. The Saudi oil embargo targeted the United States because of its relationship to Israel and the apparent lack of support from the United States to Arab nations. In this way Faisal demonstrated that no matter how “western friendly” a Saudi king might appear, regional issues were paramount and would be prioritized over the “special” relationship Saudi Arabia enjoyed with the United States.

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if United States., Dept. of State., FRUS, 1958-60, vol. XII (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of State, 1993), pg. #736
Domestically, Faisal’s rise to power sheds light on the importance of other groups in the kingdom, showing that a Saudi king’s decisions are not always unilateral. Prince Faisal had the opportunity to instigate a coup against his brother Saud, instead he took power slowly from within the existing structure, using the various governing bodies to give his move credibility. Of these groups, the Ulema specifically were responsible for pressuring Saud to let Faisal become prime minister and take on executive powers, demonstrating that the other power structures within the country do play an important role. Moreover, the fact that Faisal took power slowly and did not overthrow his brother, points to the importance Saudi princes place on the maintenance of dynastic stability over personal gain. This trend is seen more clearly in more recent king’s accessions to the throne and the lack of significant departure from their predecessors’ policies. What the then crown prince Faisal said rings true: there was “no difference between myself and the King. As is the case among friends we sometimes do not see eye to eye, but we are never at loggerheads with each other. The day will never come when I stand in one place and the King in another.”

This ultimately is how the leading princes function. Though, as the telegram from the embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State says “serious differences of opinion on state policy exist between King and Faisal” these differences cannot be said to have directly affected Saudi Arabia’s dealings with the outside world.

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Khalid and Fahad:

Because of King Faisal’s untimely and sudden demise, considerably less attention was paid to his successor than there had been to him. What was said about Prince Khalid’s personality was not very conclusive, but the area which is interesting to examine is how the United States commentators predicted the issues that would arise with the succession. In assessments of the future of US-Saudi relations a worry which clearly comes through in many documents is that “the Saudi/US relationship cannot be taken for granted” as the US’s “position in Saudi Arabia…..rests largely on the personal disposition of its king.” As with similar assessments prior to King Faisal’s reign, this worry was unsubstaniated.

Commentary on what would happen after Faisal expressed fears that a power struggle could ensue among leading princes which would destabilize the monarchy. Such a destabilization would provide the opportune moment for anyone wishing to initiate a coup. In addition to this, as a 1970 National Intelligence Estimate argued, there was an understanding that “any foreseeable royal successor would probably be more inclined to accommodate radical trends in Arab politics and less capable of suppressing dissidents.” If the expected coup did not come about, it was expected that with Faisal’s death there would likely be “less unity and firmness on the part of the House of Saud and thus more vacillation in the governing of the country.” This analysis lacks an understanding of the way in which the leading members of the royal family function. It is true

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ji King Faisal was assassinated in March 1975 by his nephew Faisal bin Musaid. The precise reasons are unknown and the man was convicted of regicide and sentenced to death.
that consensus must be built among them, but this consensus comes into play when deciding who should be the next king. If there is an agreement over the next king, that king will already have the support of a significant number of his brothers as well as the Ulema and Shura and will thus have to do relatively little to build consensus once king. Fears over Prince Khalid were expressed later in the same report when it was suggested that if he were able to “extract promises of cooperation from his various brothers, serious infighting might be avoided.” The nature of succession in the kingdom requires consensus before the selection of any king. It is for this reason that Prince Khalid was designated successor and not his older brother Mohammed who was, in theory, next in line. Prince Mohammed, regarded as unfit to rule by the collective, was bypassed.

As to the personality of Prince Khalid, characterized as being “popular with many tribal and religious leaders” and “pious,” he was not “noted for his leadership qualities” and was predicted to take over as merely a “figurehead king” with “executive powers in the hands … of his more talented half-brother Fahad.” On this, the predictions were somewhat correct. Although there are differing opinions of how much King Khalid actually governed, it is widely accepted that Prince Fahad enjoyed a large amount of authority.

As a result of his increasing importance in governance towards the end of King Faisal’s life and throughout the reign of King Khalid, assessments of Prince Fahad’s disposition were extensive.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{nn}}\text{United States., Dept. of State., FRUS, 1969-76, vol. XXIV (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of State, 2008), pg. #448}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{mm}}\text{United States., Dept. of State., FRUS, 1969-76, vol. XXIV (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of State, 2008), pg. #493}\]
Even in the late 1960’s Prince Fahad’s position in the Saudi government was worth examining as his relationship with the United States began early on. He was, in 1969, “Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior” and was thus invited to the United States at a time when strains were put on US-Saudi relations because of rising tensions in the Arab-Israeli dispute.\(^\text{90}\)

The United States recognized that its close ties with the Saudis were beginning to deteriorate as a result of what the Saudis regarded as the US’ “neglect” of the Arabs and America’s support of Israel.\(^\text{pp}\) For this reason, the United States believed that it was wise to work on a relationship with Prince Fahad who they believed would play an increasingly important role in Saudi affairs. Indeed, on some occasions it was Prince Fahad rather than Khalid who “acted in the King’s name when Faisal (had) been out of the country.”\(^\text{91}\)

Described as friendly, Fahad became a close ally of the United States Government and began to build his connections with Washington even before his accession to the throne.

On the face of it, Fahad as Minister of Interior was not the most likely ally of the United States because of the forceful nature of his actions while in that office. He was allegedly responsible for politically motivated arrests and imprisonments which were not in line with American ideals of freedom and human rights. Despite this, Fahad was singled out as potentially being an open minded partner in the future as he was expected to be “interested in advertising an interest in


\(^{91}\) United States., Dept. of State., _FRUS, 1969-76_, vol. XXIV (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of State, 2008), pg. #408
progressive reform in Saudi Arabia precisely because the repressive security policies he has carried out in his capacity as Minister of Interior probably have alienated reformist elements.”

This prediction was largely in line with the way in which Fahad presented himself in the 1970’s. For example, in a press interview in 1970 he “espoused an accelerated reform program…and proposed numerous social welfare measures.” It is interesting to note that in this press conference he gave little mention of the reforms programs which were taking place under King Faisal. In fact, Fahad’s reform programs, commendable as they were, did not represent a departure from Faisal’s policies which had begun the process of reform within the kingdom. In addition to this, as already noted, foreign policy was not expected to change dramatically so why then was there such a focus on bringing Fahad into the fold? The answer lies partly in what the alternative to Fahad was seen to be; his half-brother Abdullah.

Abdullah:

The US’ fixation on Fahad meant that the United States underestimated Abdullah. Because the US-Saudi relationship was so strong during the years in which King Fahad was on the throne, there was a fear that things would deteriorate once Abdullah became king. Correspondence between embassies in the region and Washington regarding Crown Prince Fahad is unavailable, but congressional records demonstrate some of the sentiment leading up to the his accession.

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17 United States., Dept. of State., *FRUS, 1969-76*, vol. XXIV (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of State, 2008), pg. #494
The prevailing feeling in the United States of the difference between Fahad and Abdullah was summarized in a 1981 article by Thomas Friedman entitled “Saudis under pressure: A spectre of instability?” This article, which was brought to the attention of Congress and put on the record a week before the vote was to be passed for the controversial US-Saudi AWACS (Airborne warning and control system) deal, outlines the perceived difference between the two men. The distinction made is between “modernists and conservatives” within the royal family, with Fahad allegedly in the former camp and Abdullah the latter. It also stated that Abdullah has the backing of the tribes.\textsuperscript{t}

Abdullah’s conservatism was discussed further throughout the eighties. He was quoted as saying “once Muslims achieve unity of will and action, Israel will be annihilated and disappear”\textsuperscript{uu} as an indicator of why the United States should not consider selling stinger missiles to the kingdom. Another reference to him was in regard to attacks within the kingdom against an oil facility in the coastal city of Yanbu in which he claimed that “Zionists” were behind it.\textsuperscript{vv} Prince Abdullah was again cited as a reason not to sell arms to Saudi Arabia in 1990, being referenced as saying


\textsuperscript{uu} Senator DeConcini (AZ). “US interest in Promoting a Reduction of Tension between the Arab States and Israel” \textit{Congressional Record} 132 (May 6, 1986) p. 9634-9635. Available from HeinOnline.Org; Accessed: 3/1/11

that he wished he was visiting the troops when they were preparing “to restore the usurped and legitimate rights in Palestine.”

An article by David Dunford regarding US policy towards Saudi Arabia, which was brought to the attention of the House of Representatives in August 1996, references the lack of understanding of Saudi Arabia by the American government at the time. Dunford was deputy ambassador to Saudi Arabia for four years in the early nineties and notes that the United States “fails to understand that Saudi Arabia has changed” from the early days when oil was first discovered and there was a lot of money with which to satisfy the population. He states that “Saudi Arabia can no longer buy social peace” and implies that more accountability is needed. This point helps to show the US Department of State’s limited understanding of Saudi Arabia when considering changes within the country.

King Abdullah has, contrary to predictions of him as being ultra-conservative and accounts of him being violently anti-Israeli, become a strong ally of the United States. Saudi Arabia’s relationship with the United States has improved considerably since September 11th and efforts to curb extremist mentality in the kingdom have been taking place under his watch. Most importantly, “jihadi” rehabilitation programs have been set up (and have been mimicked by the US army in Iraq) and changes are being implemented in the Saudi education system to help kill

some of the roots of extremism. With regard to Israel, the Mecca Peace Plan, which has largely been incorporated into the Arab Peace Initiative, was spearheaded by King Abdullah. This Initiative is much of the basis for the latest US roadmap to peace. Finally, the United States has just agreed to a $60 billion dollar arms sale to Saudi Arabia. This deal is the largest in US history and is expected to create an estimated 75,000 American jobs.\textsuperscript{37}

Conclusions:

The United States Government has written countless reports and held endless meetings on the future of Saudi Arabia under a different king. While there is some utility in analysis for understanding how best to interact with a new king, as a predictor of foreign and domestic policy it is a relatively futile task. Tracking the history of the US-Saudi relationships, relations were strongest or most strained at times when events globally had an effect on it, not when it was someone with a “western mentality” ruling Saudi Arabia, or when there was a republican or a democrat in Washington. Specifically, there is no evidence to suggest that the US-Saudi relationship has ever changed as a result of who is in power in Saudi Arabia.

When viewed from the outside, Saudi Arabia may appear to be hostage to the whims of an individual. The reality is very different. There are other bodies within the government which help

regulate the system and whoever is king, is chosen by a certain degree of consensus. Though the 
king has relative autonomy and power, his actions will ultimately be shaped not by his 
personality, but by domestic and geopolitical factors and considerations.

On the one hand there is the hope in the United States that whoever will next be king will be 
more western-friendly than the current. While this intuitively is a sensible desire, there appears to 
be very little calculus as to whether a more liberal and open government would necessarily be a 
good thing for the United States. In addition to this, the analysis of succession in the kingdom as 
it affects the US-Saudi relationship points to the fact that contrary to what was suggested in 
George McGhee’s conversation with Prince Faisal, Saudi-US relations are not very different 
from those of other state to state relations. Indeed, recent turmoil in the Middle East, such as 
what Saudi Arabia views as America’s abandonment of long-time ally Mubarak\(^\text{zz}\) points to the 
fact that the relationship between the United States and Arab countries has less to do with 
personal relationships between its leaders and is rather a state to state “balance of interests.”\(^\text{aaa}\)

**Implications:**

There is sufficient evidence to support the argument that judgments of crown princes are not 
accurate predictors of changes in Saudi foreign policy. Fears over whoever will be the next king

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of Saudi Arabia are unnecessary. The United States should not fear the future of US-Saudi relations as long as it is in Saudi Arabia’s interests to maintain them. A better understanding of the fact that Saudi Arabia’s policies are relatively stable and that its rulers are generally pragmatic, is important for the United States’ consideration of its long term interests in the region. Though the US-Saudi relationship is strong, fears over the future of Saudi Arabia could be a reason for not taking more advantage of the potential opportunities that Saudi Arabia can offer. For example, as the strong unifying force in the Arab Peace Plan, or as a counterweight to Iran to name but a few. As long as the house of Saud is strong, the United States should engage with it as much as possible as a partner in the region.
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