

The Calculated Advance: King Faisal's Prudent Modernisation and its Impact on Saudi Women

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ABSTRACT

In academic circles King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (r. 1964–1975) is frequently framed through the narrow lens of pan-Islamic diplomacy, an image that has largely eclipsed his profound domestic legacy. This paper problematises this predominant historiography by arguing that Faisal was the seminal architect of Saudi modernisation, whose calculated reforms deliberately laid the foundational pillars for women's social advancement. Moving beyond the reductive binary of 'Islamist' versus 'moderniser', we analyse how Faisal's Islamic convictions naturally produced a pragmatic strategy — the only one viable for his context — of using religious discourse to legitimise transformative policies in education, state bureaucracy, and infrastructure. By institutionalising girls' education under the General Presidency for Girls' Education (GPGE), professionalising the public sector, and fostering urbanisation, Faisal engineered a critical, if controlled, shift in women's social capital. We contend that these reforms created the essential preconditions for female empowerment and enabled the first generation of literate, professional Saudi women in the modern sense. In short, this paper reclaims Faisal's legacy as a development visionary, demonstrating how his prudent modernisation, which balanced progress with religious legitimacy, initiated the complex negotiation between tradition and reform that continues to define the kingdom's trajectory.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Modernisation, Prudent Modernisation, Calculated Reform, Development, WANA, Middle East, King Faisal, Pan-Islamism, Saudi Women, Women's Rights, Women's Education, Women Empowerment, Social Capital

Introduction : Saudi Arabia's Global Significance and Internal Contradictions

Saudi Arabia occupies a position of unique global influence, derived from its role as the spiritual heart of Islam, a geo-economic linchpin holding the world's largest oil reserves, and a pivotal geopolitical actor in the crucial

WANA¹ region. Yet, this international prominence has long existed in tension with its internal socio-political structures, particularly concerning the status of women. The formation of the modern Saudi state in 1932 codified a system where an absolute monarchy, rooted in an 18th century alliance with *Wahhabi* school, used religious

1. Instead of the widely prevalent term "Middle East," we prefer to use WANA (West Asia and North Africa) as "Middle East" originates from a Eurocentric worldview, coined by Western strategists who defined the region based on its position relative to Europe. This framing carries a baggage from colonial past and Orientalist episteme; and has imprecise, fluctuating boundaries that lack coherent geographical or cultural logic. In contrast, the acronym WANA (West Asia and North Africa) offers a more accurate and neutral alternative. By defining the region based on its actual geography rather than its relation to the West, WANA provides a precise, respectful, and analytically useful framework. This shift in terminology is part of a broader effort to decolonise language and describe the world on its own terms, moving away from out-dated labels rooted in a colonial past.

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legitimacy, and later vast oil wealth², to maintain power. The consolidation of this state had profound consequences for women, allegedly institutionalising a patriarchal order that confined them to the private sphere under a strict male guardianship system³.

Today, this history is directly engaged with the kingdom's transformative Vision 2030, which has driven rapid social liberalisation, including lifting the ban on women driving and weakening the guardianship system⁴. While these contemporary reforms capture the global spotlight, this paper argues that the genesis of significant Saudi modernisation lies in the pivotal reign of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (1964-1975). Contrary to a historiography that frames his legacy narrowly through pan-Islamic diplomacy, we posit that Faisal was the primary architect of the modern Saudi state—a seminal development visionary whose domestic achievements remain critically underappreciated. This paper seeks to correct this imbalance, advancing the thesis that Faisal's calculated reforms in education, infrastructure, and state bureaucracy laid the foundational pillars for the nation's subsequent trajectory, engineering a centralised state and initiating the complex, ongoing negotiation between tradition and progress, thereby shifting the kingdom from a conservative tribal state toward a centralised, developmental one. Unlike his predecessors, King Faisal successfully managed to balance tradition and reform by advancing modern state institutions while securing the support—or at least the tolerance—of the powerful religious establishment.

The argument for King Faisal as a moderniser is not entirely new. Indeed, Willard A. Beling's edited volume, *King Faisal and the Modernisation of Saudi Arabia*

(1980), stands as an early and important testament to this view. However, Beling's work, now over four decades old, reflects the limitations of its time. It was compiled before the full archival and theoretical tools of modern gender and state-building studies were widely available, and its analysis is inevitably framed by the Cold War context. Consequently, while Beling rightly identified Faisal's modernising impulse, his compendium could not fully theorise the mechanisms of this modernisation, particularly its deeply gendered dimensions and its long-term impact on women's social capital. Furthermore, in the intervening years, the powerful narrative of Faisal as an Islamist leader has largely overshadowed Beling's developmental focus in mainstream academic discourse. This paper, therefore, does not seek to rediscover Faisal the moderniser, but to reclaim and radically deepen that legacy for a contemporary audience. Building upon Beling's foundational insight, this paper integrates recent scholarship to offer a more nuanced analysis of the evolving trajectory of women's rights and status in Saudi society. We move beyond the economic and administrative modernisations to argue that Faisal's most profound and calculated advances were in the social realm, specifically through policies that deliberately, if cautiously, created the preconditions for female empowerment.

The Dominant Portrait: King Faisal as an Islamist Leader

It is first necessary to examine the basis for King Faisal's prevalent image—particularly in international academic and policy discourse—as an Islamist leader, an image we do not seek to dismiss entirely but to critically contextualise⁵. This perception stems from his consistent

2. Interestingly, on one hand some academicians have argued that the discovery of petrol enabled rapid modernisation and economic growth in Saudi Arabia. (see Al-Rasheed 2002 and Yizraeli 2012). On the other hand, other scholars argue that the advent of petrol had impacted the agency of women negatively. For example, Michael Ross (2008) propounds his 'oil patriarchy' thesis that oil economies curtail female labour force participation, thereby depriving women of the economic and political leverage necessary for reform.
3. However, the reader must be cautioned that such sweeping generalisations do not express the whole truth of the matter, as significant nuance existed within these social structures. For instance, Alhuzami and Bailey (2021: 22) highlight that the strictures of a tribal society prescribed behavioural codes for men as well as women. Furthermore, a woman's specific position and agency were not monolithic but were often contingent on a variety of personal and socioeconomic factors, including her individual character, her family's status, and the broader economic circumstances.
4. Currently, the monarchy is led by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (since 2015), with his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, acting as the de facto ruler. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, regarded as a key reformer by various analysts, has launched the Vision 2030 initiative, aiming to diversify the economy, reduce reliance on oil, and modernise Saudi society.
5. Ironically, a prominent scholarly interpretation frames Faisal's Islamic stance as fundamentally instrumental if not outright Machiavellian. It is argued that his emphasis on Islamic diplomacy was strategic, aimed at legitimising his authority and

invocation of Islamic principles in governance and foreign policy, and from a number of his key decisions, statements, and policies that positioned Islam not just as the religion of the state, but as a guiding force in all national and international affairs. While this portrayal captures a significant dimension of his leadership, we argue that, it tends to oversimplify and eclipse his broader legacy as a moderniser.

A central reason for this view is Faisal's strong emphasis on Islamic identity in governance. He publicly and repeatedly affirmed that the Qur'ân was the constitution of Saudi Arabia and that Sharia law would remain the basis of all legislation. In multiple public statements, he maintained that the Qur'ân served as the country's ultimate and sufficient constitution⁶. This rhetorical and constitutional framing aligned the monarchy closely with religious legitimacy and often projected an image of Saudi Arabia as the vanguard of Islamic governance.

Faisal's efforts to promote pan-Islamic solidarity further deepened this perception. Following the 1969 arson attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, he led the initiative to establish the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC)⁷, bringing together Muslim majority countries under a unified platform. This move, alongside his vocal support for the Palestinian cause, the Muslim population of South Asia, and other Islamic causes worldwide, contributed to the image of Faisal as a leader of global Islamic unity. His foreign policy contrasted sharply with the secular Arab nationalism promoted by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, positioning Faisal's Saudi Arabia as the Islamic counterforce to secular and socialist ideologies.

Domestically, Faisal's resistance to communism and Arab socialism was explicitly couched in religious language. This ideological stance made Saudi Arabia a key ally of the West during the Cold War, but also bolstered the perception that Faisal's regime was ideologically Islamist in nature. This framing often obscures the strategic motivations behind his alliances and policies,

reducing them to purely religious impulses.

Moreover, Faisal's close alliance with the religious establishment (*ulama*) further reinforced the Islamist image. He maintained the religious judiciary, upheld the religious police (*mutawa*), and created the General Presidency for Girls' Education in 1960 as a religiously sanctioned body. Though this move was progressive in expanding female education, it was carefully designed to preserve Islamic legitimacy. Faisal also embedded Islamic studies at the core of the national curriculum. All of these measures were seen by external observers as strengthening the clerical class and promoting a religiously conservative state identity to the extent that Soraya Altorki has reportedly asserted that "Islam is responsible for the marginal status of women in Saudi Arabia"⁸.

Even Faisal's economic and social development initiatives were often framed in Islamic moral terms. Infrastructure expansion, public welfare, and education were presented as fulfilling Islamic duties to the nation and the *ummah* (global Muslim community). This moral framing added coherence to his domestic policies but also allowed critics to characterise his governance as theocratic or at least overly religious in orientation.

Rebalancing the Narrative: Faisal as Development Visionary

While King Faisal's use of Islamic discourse was central to his rule, reducing his leadership to a religious and fundamentalist framework neglects the broader modernising and developmental vision that he pursued—often in tension with the religious establishment. To rebalance the perception, academic research must foreground Faisal's technocratic reforms, such as his expansion of state bureaucracy, introduction of five-year development plans, urban infrastructure projects, and widespread multidimensional educational reforms, especially for women. These policies marked a deliberate move toward modern statecraft, even as they were embedded in religious legitimacy. Scholars should examine how Faisal used Islamic discourse not as a dogmatic

resisting secular ideologies like Arab socialism or communism suggesting a pragmatic rather than purely doctrinaire motivation. Kutty(1997: 145), for instance, writes that Faisal invoked Pan-Islamism "as a counter ideology" to Nasserism and Arab Nationalism.

6. See Vassiliev 2000: 364-391

7. Now known as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The name was changed in 2011.

8. Quoted in Al-Rasheed 2013: 15.

endpoint but as an ideological framework and viable methodology to facilitate reform in a conservative society.

To move beyond the reductive binary of Faisal as either an 'Islamist' or a 'moderniser,' future research must pursue more empirical studies of his developmental legacy. Archival work, oral histories, and policy analysis focused on education, urbanisation, and women's inclusion are crucial. Furthermore, situating his reforms within the broader contexts of Gulf state formation and postcolonial development would illuminate the nuanced complexities of governance that defined his reign.

Faisal's most transformative legacy lies in the expansion and formalisation of the education sector. Upon assuming power, he prioritised building a national education system that extended beyond religious instruction. Most significantly, in 1960, he authorised the creation of the General Presidency for Girls' Education (GPGE), which institutionalised formal education for girls for the first time in Saudi history. Although the decision faced opposition from conservative clerics, Faisal justified it through religious discourse, framing education for women as consistent with Islamic values. His wife, Queen Iffat al-Thunayan, played a pioneering role by founding the Dar Al-Hanan School for Girls in Jeddah in 1955 and advocating for broader educational opportunities for women. This was a landmark moment that shifted the public perception of women's roles allowing their participation in education while maintaining cultural and religious legitimacy.

The institutionalisation of girls' education under King Faisal was a revolutionary departure, yet its success was contingent on a profound pragmatism. While scholars like Al-Rasheed (2013) emphasise that the system was designed to maintain religious control—segregating girls' education under the conservative General Presidency and emphasising domesticity in its curriculum—this critique often overlooks the socio-political realities⁹. Taking into cognisance the context in which Faisal was operating, Kutty (1997: 108) astutely observes that the government's

guarantee of strict gender segregation was not an impediment but the essential precondition for progress. In the face of intense opposition, a policy that disregarded this fundamental tradition could have been disastrous. Therefore, the system's apparent conservatism was, in fact, a calculated strategy that enabled its revolutionary outcome: the creation of a new class of educated Saudi women. This provided the crucial social capital that allowed subsequent generations to gradually challenge the very boundaries of the system designed to contain them, paving the way for their eventual access to universities like King Saud and King Abdulaziz in the 1970s both of which expanded under Faisal's direction¹⁰.

Faisal also modernised Saudi Arabia's administrative apparatus, transforming a fragmented and tribal governance system into a more coherent bureaucratic state. He initiated five-year development plans, restructured ministries, and introduced merit-based hiring for civil service roles. These efforts professionalised the public sector and improved government efficiency, laying the groundwork for the delivery of modern services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. By linking career advancement to educational attainment, these reforms also created long-term incentives for both men and women to pursue education and professional careers¹¹.

The expansion of bureaucratic structures indirectly empowered women by creating employment opportunities in sectors deemed culturally acceptable—particularly teaching, healthcare, and clerical work in women-only institutions. These early openings helped shape the emergence of a public female workforce within strict religious and gender boundaries. King Faisal's administrative reforms thus served a dual function: they professionalised the state while enabling women to gain limited, but significant, access to the public sphere¹².

A major driver of Faisal's modernisation agenda was investment in national infrastructure. Benefiting from rising oil revenues in the 1960s and early 1970s, Faisal

9. Here the state's approach is characterised as one of controlled modernisation. It has been argued that the creation of the General Presidency for Girls' Education ensured religious oversight, and initial access was limited, often extending to higher education only through non-resident study (*intisab*). This institutionalised a system where female advancement was permitted only within strict religious and patriarchal boundaries.

10. Kutty 1997: 76-108 (Also see Ansari and Khan 2014: 45-70; Hamdan 2005 and Kechichian 2008)

11. See Kutty 1997: 63-74 (Also see Niblock 2006)

12. See Kutty 1997: 109-126 (Also see Le Renard 2014)

expanded the construction of roads, schools, hospitals, universities, and communication networks. Urban centres such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam witnessed rapid development, drawing populations from rural and tribal areas into new urban lifestyles. This urbanisation not only improved access to public services but also weakened traditional tribal structures and increased the visibility of women in segregated yet more public settings.

Mass media also grew under Faisal's reign, with Saudi state television launched in 1965. Though heavily censored, this medium contributed to shifting cultural norms by broadcasting images of education, development, and national unity that subtly included women. Scholars have noted that the state managed to craft a narrative of controlled modernisation that allowed the inclusion of women without triggering a religious or social backlash. Mass media and development of infrastructure thus acted as a physical and symbolic foundation for change, expanding women's access to schools, universities, clinics, and other semi-public spaces¹³.

The long-term effects of King Faisal's reforms were foundational for the trajectory of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. While he did not enact explicit legal changes to end male guardianship or promote gender equality in western terms, his policies enabled the first generation of literate and professionally trained Saudi women. These women would later become teachers, doctors, writers, and activists, quietly reshaping public life from within its gendered boundaries. Educational reform, in particular, created the social capital necessary for subsequent reforms under King Abdullah (2005-2015) and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030.

We argue that Faisal's genius lay in framing profound social changes, like female education, as consistent with—rather than a threat to—Islamic values. This strategy of using state institutions to balance progress with legitimacy created a viable pathway for future reform. Yet, this historical precedent casts a critical light on the kingdom's subsequent trajectory. To what extent have his successors struggled to maintain this delicate equilibrium?

Conclusion: King Faisal's Enduring Legacy

In sum, Faisal's reign marked the beginning of Saudi Arabia's transformation into a modern state, with far-reaching implications for women's rights and national

development. Through his investments in education, administration, and infrastructure, Faisal laid the groundwork for the country's transition from a tribal-religious monarchy into a modern-bureaucratic-religious state. His decision to institutionalise girls' education—despite some conservative resistance—was a turning point in Saudi history, providing the necessary conditions for women to slowly enter public life. While his reforms did not dismantle patriarchal structures, they created the institutional and cultural space in which future reforms could take root. For these reasons, King Faisal remains the most critical figure in Saudi Arabia's modernisation.

We have argued that King Faisal's legacy as a developmental reformer remains critically under appreciated especially in non-Arabic scholarship. His strategic use of Islamic rhetoric has too often led to a simplistic classification of his reign under the banner of political Islam, thereby eclipsing his substantial contributions to modernisation. This misinterpretation stems from a perceived contradiction between his Islamic identity and his technocratic vision—a false binary that has profoundly obscured his true legacy. The very Islamic identity used to label him, as mere a figure of political Islam, was, in fact, the foundation from which his technocratic vision emerged. Faisal, who did not share the conservative interpretation of many contemporary *ulema*, saw his religious convictions not as a tension with his modernising projects, but as their driving force and legitimising framework. Therefore, a pressing scholarly task is to move beyond this simplistic dichotomy and reassess his reign through a multidisciplinary, development-oriented lens—one that analyses his religious symbolism and developmental drive as an integrated whole. Filling this gap is essential not only for a true understanding of Saudi Arabia's trajectory but also for enriching the global discourse on state-led development in postcolonial contexts.

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13. See Kutty 1997: 127-142 (Also see Al-Rasheed 2013)

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