tension between women’s traditional role and the new professionalism enforced by the Soviet regime in view of social customs, such as for instance rituals and domestic hierarchies.

The importance of studying these geographical areas is due to the rapid social change this region has lately gone through. Moreover, an important aspect is the phenomenon, common to most countries in the region, of equal opportunities for men and women being enforced by the state whereas traditional gender roles remain in the private sphere. It is, however, pertinent to point at that the book was written in 2000. In view of the enormous development in most fields of life in this region during the last decade this book is an important background study for research on the continuous process of social change in the region.

Anne Sofie Roald


During the last fifty years of the 20th century, the Arab world has had the good fortune of having a leadership that dominated the contemporary events and also left a huge legacy, both good and bad. Personalities like Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir (d. 1390/1970), Yāsir ‘Arafāt (d. 1425/2004), Ḥāfīz al-Asad (d. 1421/2000) and Fāyṣal b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 1395/1975) shaped the history and destiny of the Arab world and became legends in their own lifetimes. Regrettably, the tradition of scholarship and erudition in the region has been weak, and hence their achievements have scarcely been recorded by the Western media and historians. The most important issue around which these leaders, mostly contemporaneous leaders, fashioned their politics is the Palestine issue.

The Arabs, despite all the facts on their side, failed to arouse understanding and sympathy of the world powers regarding the plight of Palestinians. In an age of mass communication and information revolution, the Arabs have remained far behind their adversaries. Consequently, their cause has suffered by default. There are only a handful of journalists honest
and bold enough to record the developments as objectively as possible. Eric Rouleau, Robert Fisk, Patrick Seale, along with a couple of academics such as Edward Said (d. 2003), come to mind among those who have chronicled the events and made their assessments honestly and faithfully.

King Faysal [Fayṣal] (r. 1383–1395/1964–1975) was both a statesman and a politician who wielded enormous influence in the Arab world and yet remained aloof, almost enigmatic. The literature on Arab personalities is also scarce. On the other hand, the Israeli leaders — Chaim Azriel Weismann (d. 1952), Moshe Dayan (d. 1981), Menachem Begin (d. 1992), Yitzhak Rabin (d. 1995) and Abba Eban (d. 2002) — to name a few — have written voluminous autobiographies justifying Israel’s actions and policies. These writings leave a significant impact on the reader.

Kéchichian’s biography of Faysal is, therefore, a welcome addition to the works on the political culture and history of the Middle East. In a very skilful narrative, Kéchichian has woven Faysal’s career and contribution around the politics of the region. The book therefore is not only a detached and detailed account of Faysal’s life and his vision of Muslim unity and solidarity, but also of the complex tribal traditions that he weaved into modernization.

Faysal’s leadership role during the mid-1970s, in particular the Ramadan 1393/October 1973 War and the oil embargo, have not been fully appreciated or documented. Former Saudi Oil Minister Ahmad Zaki Yamani has very perceptively observed, “If Faysal had lived, I don’t think we would have seen the Camp David agreement. He was so very respected by all the leaders in the Middle East that if he was against something, they would not do it” (pp. 198–199).

The reviewer has had the rare privilege to observe the enormous impact that King Faysal’s presence made during the Safar 1394/February 1974 Second Islamic Summit in Lahore. His personality exuded a charisma that was intimidating. The other Arab leaders present in the Summit—legendary figures in their own right—looked upon Faysal in awe and admiration.

King Faysal ruled Saudi Arabia from 1383/1964 till 1395/1975, defining Saudi Arabia as we know it today. Even before becoming King, Faysal exerted great influence in shaping the monarchy’s domestic and foreign policies. In his comprehensive account of Faysal’s life and rule, Joseph A. Kéchichian provides an examination of this influence. *Faysal: Saudi Arabia’s King for All Seasons* is an accessible and thorough analysis of the manner in which Faysal lent the Kingdom an ideological legitimacy, one which continues to play a defining role.

Kéchichian outlines Faysal’s multifaceted role over many decades in Saudi Arabia. Born in 1324/1906, Faysal was asked to take on a significant political
role before he even turned 20. In 1345/1926, Faysal went to London as a goodwill emissary. In 1391/1932, Faysal was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, and he even played a commanding role in the 1353/1934 Saudi-Yemeni war. As Foreign Minister, Faysal attempted early on to bring harmony in Saudi Arabia’s foreign affairs and its internal developments, lending them a degree of consistency that had so far eluded them. For instance, Kéchichian cites the example of the challenge Saudi Arabia faced from Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s. Saudi Arabia was forced to respond to the wave of Arab nationalism by emphasizing Islamic values as the formulation of its foreign policy (see, pp. 174 ff.).

In 1373/1953, when Faysal’s elder brother Saud [Sa‘ūd b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz] (r. 1373–1383/1953–1964) ascended the Saudi throne, Faysal was appointed Crown Prince and Prime Minister. Faysal faced numerous challenges on the domestic front. Inheriting a financial crisis and a debt of 400 million Riyals owed to banks and loyal merchants, Faysal implemented a programme of massive cutbacks and a balanced budget.

Kéchichian posits three principal legacies of Faysal: a legacy of strong political leadership which resuscitated the Al Sa‘ūd family; a legacy of strong Islamic Wahhābi values; and finally, a legacy of what Kéchichian refers to as Faysal’s “desert culture.” Faysal’s emphasis on tribal loyalty and the religious establishment ruled out any possibility of revolutionary change; instead, he embraced the notions of “traditional heritage.”

Kéchichian emphasizes Faysal’s role in promoting pan-Islamism as a basic tenet of his foreign policy. “In the end, Faysal’s most enduring legacy was his successful defense of faith, which empowered Riyadh and legitimized the Al Sa‘ūd,” Kéchichian argues (p. 199). “Ideology, in its normative role and as applied by King Faysal, was the source of views on the proper allocation of resources in society, the desirable qualities of rulership and authority, and, by implication, the source of the regime’s legitimacy.”

Faysal: Saudi Arabia’s King for All Seasons is a valuable addition to the available literature on the history of Saudi Arabia and its royal family.

Tayyab Siddiqui