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**JAMES FOX**, in Riyadh, interviews the new Saudi strongman Prince Fahd (pictured above) and investigates the circumstances of the assassination of King Faisal (right)

# THE LAST MOMENTS OF KING FAISAL

SOMEWHERE deep inside the Governor's Palace in Riyadh, Prince Museid, officially insane according to a "settlement issued by the Royal Cabinet" was still locked up with his interrogators yesterday four and a half days after he pulled the trigger on his uncle King Faisal.

Across the road is a large mosque with ancient electric fans and in front of it the dusty main square of baked mud where, after prayers on holy days, the public executions take place. Museid's fate is still being debated by Faisal's sons and by the interpreters of the Sharia (Islamic law). It is unlikely in the ever diminishing possibility of his execution that it would happen in public, however.

Prince Museid is under the authority of his uncle Prince Salman, Governor of Riyadh and a powerful figure in the family hierarchy. Walking through the vast ante-rooms to present yourself at his inner office you are closely watched by about a hundred Saudi tribesmen, bristling with weapons, sitting shoulder to

shoulder in deep modern arm-chairs. There they sit all day, but elsewhere in this austere capital, you rarely see an armed policeman or soldier in the streets.

The Saudis have managed the whole crisis with a remarkable calmness. Riyadh gives out a sense of remoteness and austerity at the best of times. Since the assassination the city has closed down completely as three days of mourning moved into the Muslim weekend.

Near the end of one of the wide, desolate boulevards, past an automobile dump are two rusty iron gates, one of them coming off its hinges, which are the entrance to the cemetery where Faisal is buried. The cemetery looks like a moonscape of rubble: the graves, unmarked by graven monuments, almost indistinguishable from the earth itself. Only a few Saudis were standing around the pile of stones. One of them tried to point out the graves of Faisal's father Abdul Aziz and of Saud, his brother whom he deposed and who died in Switzerland.

FAISAL'S DEATH has been treated with a complete lack of sentimentality by the Saudis. By tradition they bury their dead quickly—before sunset on the same day. Faisal was not buried until the following day having lain in state. That and the fact that President Sadat of Egypt bent over and kissed the forehead of the dead king were departures from tradition widely commented on. "It is thought wrong to cry over a dead body," said one Saudi "because it is illogical."

Alongside the political speculations about the manoeuvres within the Royal inner circle, it has taken a few days to piece together the sequence of events that led to Faisal's death. The ease with which not only a prince but almost anyone can approach the King is a carefully preserved tradition that would offend greatly if it was reversed.

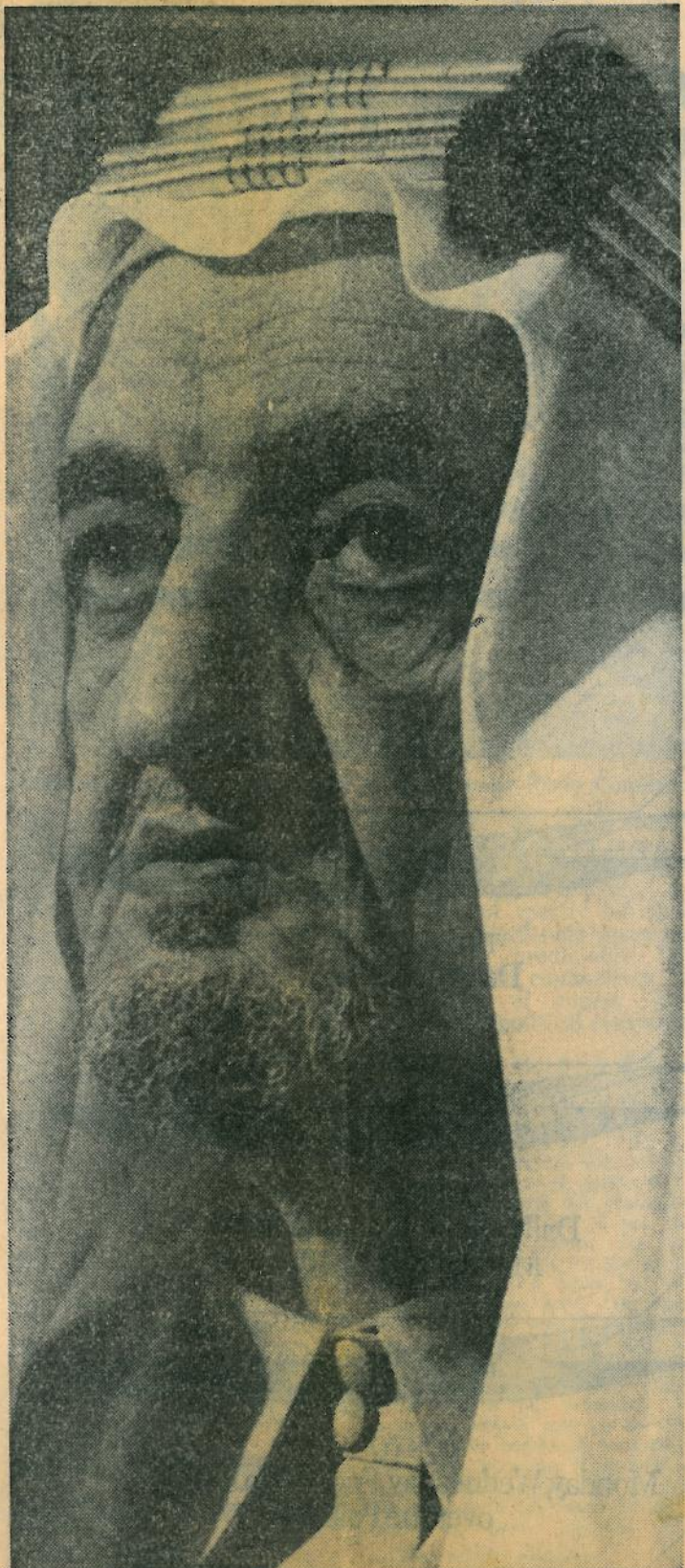
## How Museid got in

The few eye-witness accounts vary, but the most reliable version seems to be that Prince Museid was waiting in the ante-room with a Kuwaiti delegation headed by their oil minister, Abdel Motalib Al Kazimeh, who had been a classmate of the Prince in America. Sheikh Yamani, the Saudi oil minister, did not recognise Museid and thought he was part of the Kuwaiti delegation. Yamani led the party into the salon.

Faisal emerged from his private office to greet them with his protocol chief, Ahmed Abdul Wahab. There was also a television crew present. Faisal first shook hands with the Kuwaiti minister then, recognising his nephew, extended his hand and bent forward as if to kiss him.

At that moment, Museid pulled his gun—a small pistol—from his pocket. He shot Faisal first under the chin then through the ear. The third bullet grazed his forehead.

As the King fell, Abdul Wahab jumped on the killer



and grabbed the arm that was holding the pistol. One of the guards hit the Prince with his sword which was still sheathed. As the rest of the party were being hustled out of the room Yamani is said to have shouted to the guard not to kill the prince.

Faisal was rushed to hospital still alive. For one hour the doctors massaged his heart, took X-rays and injected blood in large quantities, but were unable to stop it flowing from the artery in his neck where the bullet had penetrated.

Both before and afterwards, Prince Museid had been very calm. He had been chatting with the Kuwaiti minister in the waiting-room and offered no resistance afterwards. Somewhere there now exists a TV film of the whole incident, but it is not likely to be seen.

THE HASTINESS with which the Saudis put out the story of Museid's madness is perplexing. One theory is that this set the tone for a stay of execution since under Muslim law the insane cannot be sentenced in this way. It is up to his family (in this case Faisal's sons), the holy men and legal advisers to say whether he will be executed. If not he will spend the rest of his life in prison.

Museid's behaviour and his background, of which what is known suggests no more than a slightly erratic personality, make it all look like a carefully premeditated act and one that required considerable nerve. It has emerged here, however, from highly placed sources, that Museid had started out three times in the past three months to kill the King, "but his courage failed him." Two weeks before he had asked for an audience with Faisal but was told that he was too busy.

The madness of Museid's branch of the Royal Family is talked about to support the derangement theory. His father was reported to have been seen in Paris in 1952 dancing naked by a fountain brandishing a sword and on another occasion to have stepped off an aeroplane wearing a Field Marshal's uniform and demanding a guard of honour. Until his own father died, Museid's father was kept under virtual house arrest and then moved to Beirut where Faisal recently gave him one million Riyal (£120,000) to buy a house.

Museid was also said to have had a strong motive for killing

the King—to avenge his brother who lost his life while making a violent religious demonstration against the setting up of a TV station in Riyadh. It is still unclear whether the brother was shot by police during his actual attack on the TV station and Faisal exonerated the policeman concerned, or whether he was executed some time later. Either way Museid might have had a grievance against Faisal, though he waited ten years for his revenge.

## Conspiracy theories

"Or is there a bigger motive," said a Saudi official. "There is a fear of a Zionist or a Communist connection. He is a mystery boy to us. We have to trace his friends in America." President Boumediene of Algeria was just one person who came to Riyadh to pay his respects convinced that there was someone behind Museid. Inevitably, conspiracy theories abound. Did the CIA want to weaken the unity of the oil States? Was Faisal's obsession against Zionism seen as an obstacle to a Middle East peace solution? Did the Russians dislike his support of Sadat against Communist dependence?

THE POLITICAL readjustment since Faisal's death has also been shrouded in secrecy. Almost immediately the new King Khalid made several statements both publicly and privately saying he wanted to relinquish the role of King. It was said to be the Saudi strongman Prince Fahd (Deputy Prime Minister and now Crown Prince) who persuaded him to remain. Their joint efforts have apparently been aimed at changing as little as possible.

Many people think that King Khalid's weakness as a figurehead will speed up a process that Prince Fahd had already started, towards more progressive government, even to a parliamentary system. But Prince Fahd's own family group, the Sudairi Seven, named after their mother, seem to be holding on to the key positions which include Prince Sultan as Defence Minister, Prince Turki the Deputy Defence Minister and Prince Salman the Governor of Riyadh. The most important figure outside that group is Prince Abdullah, who is a full brother of the new King, named yesterday as Second Deputy Prime Minister.

Prince Saud, Faisal's son and Yamani's deputy, was yesterday elevated to Minister for Foreign Affairs. It is here that Faisal's death leaves the greatest vacuum, at the most sensitive time.

One senior Saudi official said, "There may be a foreign policy change now. We may be just a bit tougher. We don't want to be branded as puppets to the USA and the West; they have been muscling Faisal into recognition of Israel and acceptance of Jerusalem as a part of Israel—something he would never accept, though he has made a compromise. Now Kissinger must begin again."



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the General Secretary,  
United Kingdom Beneficent Association,  
more Road, London W14 8RL. Tel: 01-602 6274.

What else can I do?

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