

# THICKER THAN OIL

America's Uneasy Partnership  
with Saudi Arabia



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## Prologue

The plane touched down on the hot and sandy Riyadh airstrip at 5 p.m., behind schedule. America's representative in Saudi Arabia, J. Rives Childs, stepped off the aircraft, followed by two young American foreign service officers, Donald C. Bergus and Hermann F. Eilts. It was March 1949, and Childs was in Riyadh to upgrade America's diplomatic presence in Saudi Arabia to an embassy, a step suggesting the evolving importance of that country.<sup>1</sup> Until that point, America had been represented by a legation, a small diplomatic mission operating out of Jeddah. The embassy Childs established would not move from Jeddah to Riyadh until 1984.

In 1949 Saudi Arabia was cautiously engaging the modern world. Jeddah, one of its most cosmopolitan and dynamic cities, was an old walled city of about thirty thousand people. It didn't have a single paved street, and camels wandered through the middle of town. There were no public utilities of any kind—no electric lights, running water, or sewage system. Fifty-gallon tanks from Wadi Fatimah, twenty miles away, were hauled in each morning to provide the legation with water. The tanks usually ran dry by about two in the afternoon.<sup>2</sup>

Royal escorts met Childs' flight and guided his small team to the king's guest house, a simple mud hut with straw-filled mattresses. Until the early 1940s fewer than a hundred American and Europeans had set foot in Riyadh. According to convention, each visitor received a gift of traditional Arab clothing. One did not meet the king in Western attire. Childs had his own Arab costume, but the two young officers gratefully accepted the gifts.

A tailor arrived to shorten the oversized garments, but since the plane had arrived late and it was now nearly prayer time, he left with a promise

to return shortly. The meeting with the king approached, but the tailor did not, leaving poor Bergus and Eilts with no choice but to don the untailed extra-long thobes—the traditional shirt dress still worn today by many Saudi males. Bergus and Eilts hiked up their thobes and went off to meet the king, who was waiting for them at the Murubba palace, his main residence. The bedraggled Americans cut quite an image for the amused, if somewhat surprised, members of the royal entourage, including men such as Youssef Yassin, Fouad Hamza, and H. St. John Philby (the king’s confidant and the father of the notorious British double agent Kim Philby), sent to accompany the visitors.

The trio approached the nearly blind sixty-nine-year-old king, who was sitting in a high-backed chair in the royal palace’s main receiving room, illuminated by kerosene lamps. Childs presented his credentials to the king, who made a brief comment about the importance of close ties between their nations. Childs then bowed, shook hands with the king, and backed out of the room. Don Bergus, who, unlike Childs, had been properly instructed on what to do, bowed, shook hands, and then turned to exit properly. Finding himself face-to-face with a receding Childs, he did what any good underling would do: he whirled back around to mimic his boss. Eilts did the same. The seasoned diplomat, flanked by two minions with “evening gowns in hand,” slowly backed down the corridor.

Halfway out of the room, the ambassador bumped into one of the hall’s many pillars and lost his balance. Bergus, whose garment was much too long, stumbled onto Childs, toppling him to the floor. Eilts, himself destined to become U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia in 1966, tripped next, landing atop both his colleagues. “*Shoo heatha, shoo heatha*”—what’s going on, what’s going on? cried the Saudi king, hearing the commotion, but unable to see clearly the heap of Americans on the floor—or, perhaps, able to see it all too clearly. The Saudi foreign minister and future king, Prince Faisal, along with a number of other well-positioned Saudis, surged forward, disentangled the Americans, and hastily ushered them out. As Hermann Eilts remembers it, “Five minutes after the American embassy was established in Saudi Arabia, we were flat on our collective butts.”<sup>3</sup> Childs didn’t speak to his young staffers for weeks.

### “An Accident Waiting to Happen”

Few relationships are as vital, under as much pressure, and as poorly understood as that between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia. The 865,000-square-mile kingdom, equivalent in area to more than one-fifth of the United States, sits astride one-quarter of the world's proven oil reserves and neighbors two of America's foreign policy hot spots, Iraq and Iran, and one of its closest friends, Israel. Every devout Muslim turns toward its holy city, Mecca, five times a day to pray.

Traditionally the United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia has been characterized as a basic bargain of "oil for security." For its part, since the mid-1970s, Saudi Arabia has ensured the free flow of oil at reasonable prices. The kingdom's ability to put oil on the market quickly during times of crisis is the most obvious benefit the United States gains from good relations. Immediately after September 11, for example, Saudi Arabia increased oil shipments to the United States in order to keep prices stable. It also augmented oil production just before Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced, a time when political strife in Venezuela and Nigeria threatened to elevate oil prices dramatically. In return for this, the United States extends to Saudi Arabia's leadership a security umbrella, including a commitment to its territorial integrity. Since 1950 the United States has explicitly vowed to help defend the kingdom against external threats—including, over the years, the Soviet Union, Yemen, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq. Since the fall of the shah of Iran in 1979, this commitment has evolved into implicit support for the Saudi regime against internal challenges, including today's al-Qaeda.<sup>4</sup>

Although the notion of oil for defense is a compelling shorthand for describing the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, it ignores overlapping strategic interests that drove together successive Saudi kings and American administrations. A critical, if often overlooked, aspect of the U.S.-Saudi relationship has been the shared interest in combating the Soviet Union. After all, who better for the United States to partner with in its fight against "godless Communism" than a religiously motivated state such as Saudi Arabia? Successive Saudi leaders were similarly concerned about the ideological threat posed by the atheistic Soviet Union and its proxies in the region. Their concern was driven by the fact that the ruling family's domestic legitimacy was based on a long-standing bargain with religious clerics. Saudi Arabia and the United States' mutual fear of the Soviet Union's expanding global influence, predicated on strategic and religious realities, provided a protective political layer that enveloped oil and defense interests. It also left behind a legacy that today enflames the Middle East.

For most of Saudi Arabia's recent history, the two states shared important geostrategic interests that drove together leaders from both states, despite real differences. During the 1960s America helped Saudi Arabia

defend its borders against Soviet-supported Egypt, which repeatedly bombed Saudi territory during a proxy war in Yemen. America and Saudi Arabia worked together to beat back growing Iranian influence during the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988. Most importantly, during the Cold War Saudi Arabia was one of the few Middle East countries the United States could regularly rely upon for military access, financial assistance, and political support. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia never seriously played the United States off the Soviet Union, as many of its neighbors such as Egypt and Iraq tried to do.<sup>5</sup> For over three decades, Saudi Arabia actively supported anti-Communist insurgencies and governments, influencing politics from Central Asia to Central America. But Saudi Arabia's political support was conjoined with religious proselytizing. Mosques, schools, and the education of local clerics who enrolled in Saudi Arabia's austere religious universities followed in the wake of Saudi assistance.

Contrary to the myth repeated regularly by diplomats on both sides, relations between the two states have not always been smooth. The United States and Saudi Arabia have weathered deep differences with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Saudi leaders and citizens, like other Arabs, usually focus on America's "unflinching" support for Israel. Less than two months after the 2001 terrorist attacks, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal, declared that the Bush administration's approach toward the Arab-Israeli conflict "makes a sane man go mad."<sup>6</sup> When Americans think of Saudi Arabia, they tend only to envision a country that raises vast sums of money for the most extreme anti-Israel groups such as Hamas. Almost every major U.S. weapons sale to Saudi Arabia in recent history has caused protesters to gather outside the White House, often carrying placards linking Saudi Arabia to anti-Israel funding. However, even within this controversial arena, each capital has pursued over the years a much more nuanced set of policies than is usually acknowledged. The United States has at times pushed hard for a peaceful settlement, either withholding financial assistance from Israel, bringing leaders together at Camp David, or, most recently, calling for a Palestinian state. Saudi Arabia used its financial leverage to cool Egypt's once fiery rhetoric (especially after 1967), moderate Syria's intransigent foreign policy, and twice put forward plans that suggested a recognition of Israel, although not as unambiguously as some would have liked. Saudi Arabia's late King Fahd, who for all intents and purposes ruled the kingdom from the Ford presidency until 2005, quietly told successive presidents that his government would support a two-state solution if agreed upon by both parties. In 1981 he publicly put forward the Fahd Plan, which included the controversial

(at least inside Saudi Arabia) assertion that “all states in the region should be able to live in peace in the region.” Still, it is equally clear that Saudi leaders will not sacrifice the House of Saud in order to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace.

While the events of September 11 unleashed a wave of criticism of, and profound questioning about, the U.S.-Saudi relationship, relations between the two had been deteriorating for almost a decade prior. As one prominent Saudi businessman poignantly described it to me in an e-mail shortly after the attacks, the public furor “was an accident waiting to happen.” Since the end of the Cold War, government leaders on both sides allowed the relationship to coast on autopilot, even as changing global realities weakened the relationship’s basic pillars. The acrimony between Saudi Arabia and the United States that burst forth at the beginning of the twenty-first century is directly attributable to the September 11 terror attacks. But the roots of the U.S.-Saudi disassociation stem back to November 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down.

When it comes to the U.S.-Saudi relationship, Middle East policy makers have a striking case of historical amnesia, in part because so little serious work exists on the official bilateral relationship between the two states. Books and movies that spotlight a particular president’s close relationship with Saudi Arabia miss the point that almost *every* administration since that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt has had close ties to the kingdom. Roosevelt set the warm tone for the official relationship in 1945 when he met with Saudi Arabia’s King Abdel Aziz on the Great Bitter Lake just south of the Suez Canal. Even Eisenhower and Kennedy ended up with strong relations with Saudi Arabia, despite initial efforts to distance their administrations. Both Democratic and Republican administrations, before and after the 1973 oil boom, built close ties to the kingdom. Saudi Arabia’s kings Abdel Aziz, Saud, Faisal, Khaled, and Fahd all sought the same with the United States. The reason for this has much to do with Saudi Arabia’s oil holdings and vulnerable security situation, but also with a set of mutually shared global interests defined during the Cold War, interests that have since crumbled.

Recent books seem more intent on feeding public outrage than on seriously probing the relationship.<sup>7</sup> Only a handful focus seriously on oil or succession.<sup>8</sup> Still fewer try to figure out what the world looks like through the lens used by Saudi decision makers.<sup>9</sup> Politics and history seem all but absent from the debate over the U.S.-Saudi relationship.<sup>10</sup> Why have we been partners for sixty years? How have politics, the oil business, and religion commingled? When did the relationship go

sour? Should we, can we, salvage what worked? Could we, must we, jettison the whole relationship?

The attacks of September 11, 2001, caused an unprecedented public outcry on both sides, with many arguing that the benefits of close ties did not warrant the overwhelming costs. A July 2002 briefing to the illustrious Defense Policy Board, an advisory committee of American strategic luminaries devoted to assisting the secretary of defense, defined Saudi Arabia as “the kernel of evil, the prime mover, the most dangerous opponent” in the Middle East and advised U.S. forces to target Saudi Arabia’s oil fields and seize its assets.<sup>11</sup> While campaigning for the presidency, Senator John F. Kerry made it clear that while “the truth is that we have deep, and for the moment inescapable ties” with Saudi Arabia, he nonetheless had “specific concerns,” most notably that the kingdom’s “officially sanctioned bigotry breeds terrorism.”<sup>12</sup> In August 2002 Hassan Yassin, a longtime Saudi government official, penned an op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times* acknowledging that “the United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are drifting apart.”<sup>13</sup> As late as June 2005 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated emphatically that “for 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East—and we achieved neither.”<sup>14</sup> The reference to sixty years, coming as it did around the time of the sixtieth anniversary of the first meeting between Roosevelt and Abdel Aziz, was a direct message to the Saudi leadership that Washington wanted change, and was reportedly interpreted as such in Riyadh. In Saudi Arabia, members of the royal family are actively debating the utility of close relations with the United States.

As it pursues its war on terror America faces the central and difficult question of what policy to build vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, especially as the Cold War justification has fallen away. New issues, including counterterrorism, political reform, and stability in Iraq, populate today’s political agenda and are rarely interpreted the same way by both capitals. Saudi Arabia’s religious credentials, something Washington once deemed a strategic asset, are today a much more obvious, controversial, and potentially dangerous issue. At the same time, the kingdom poses one of the toughest challenges to the George W. Bush administration’s political reform agenda, one of the administration’s highest priorities. The kingdom lags behind on almost every indicator of political openness, and reform there would have an immediate positive effect throughout the region. Yet because the kingdom figures so prominently on issues such as oil, Iraq, and counterterrorism, there are limits to how hard the United States can push. Reformers inside the kingdom also



worry that a frenetic push toward reform will backfire and result in increased religious radicalism, as occurred in Iran and Algeria, or outright chaos, as in Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

For its part, Saudi Arabia is no longer the impoverished, insular country that American oil companies and diplomatic representatives first engaged nearly seventy-five years ago. It has emerged as a major regional player and a significant global one, able to influence the price of oil—one of the world's most important commodities. Demand from oil-hungry states such as China and India, not just the requirements of traditional markets such as Europe and the United States, now influences Saudi decisions. Religious institutions that were constructed four decades ago today serve as powerful political transmission belts for Saudi Arabia's influence across the globe.

With the end of the Cold War, economic, political, and geographical circumstances have changed so dramatically that neither the U.S. nor Saudi leadership should expect the continuation of the same kind of relationship that existed for more than half a century. Still, there is good reason for each to work to ensure that the relationship does not collapse entirely, nor become so strained that cooperation on existing problems becomes impossible.

Today's all-important strategic question is whether Saudi Arabia will use its foreign aid and the global pulpit provided by Islam's two holiest mosques to turn the tide in the ideological battle of our age: the spread of Islamic radicalism. Since May 2003, when simultaneous bombings occurred in Riyadh, the Saudi government has aggressively cracked down on homegrown radical religious cells, the existence of which had been previously denied. The government has clamped down on charitable giving and has instituted legislation in order to monitor the outflow of money more effectively. It also initiated a series of domestic reforms aimed at broadening its domestic legitimacy. Such actions are extremely important. As Frances "Fran" Fragos Townsend, assistant to the president and homeland security advisor, stated at a 2005 conference on counter-terrorism in Riyadh, "The world cannot defeat terrorism without Saudi Arabia defeating terrorism on its own grounds."<sup>16</sup> But is the Saudi government willing and able to act as determinedly on the international stage, where Islamic radicalism flourishes? Can it control a new generation of religious firebrands who garner considerable popular support? Neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia, alone or in partnership, has yet developed a convincing strategy for reducing Islamic radicalism's global influence.

There are many reasons why the United States could walk away from decades of close relations, chief among them a fact that the Saudi

leadership was hard-pressed to acknowledge: fifteen of the nineteen September 11 hijackers were Saudi citizens. Many of the schools and mosques once supported by Saudi charitable assistance still spew out virulent anti-Americanism. A 2005 report by the Center for Religious Freedom highlighted intolerant and at times violent material from a number of U.S. mosques, much of which was printed with Saudi support. The materials, collected between November 2003 and December 2004, provide disturbing evidence of “the content of Wahhabi indoctrination within the United States.”<sup>17</sup> Although the report’s authors give only passing mention to the fact that most of the “titles were published in the 1980s and 1990s” (until 1989 many in the United States government were actively encouraging the proliferation of religious fighters in order to confront the Soviets in Afghanistan) and “that some of the titles were published by groups and entities that in the last two years have been shut down or have broken ties with the Saudi government,” a secondhand market for virulent materials published with onetime Saudi support still exists, even in the United States. These are problems that will not go away anytime soon. As one senior Saudi asked me somewhat provocatively, what does the United States have in common with “a country where women can’t drive, the Quran is the constitution, and beheadings are commonplace?”—a question echoed by countless American and Saudi citizens.

In spite of very real differences between the two countries, turning our backs on Saudi Arabia risks abandoning reformers inside the kingdom, both within the royal family and in the broader population, and producing the very reality we seek to avoid—a clash of civilizations between the West, represented by the United States, and the Muslim world, led by Saudi Arabia. It also denies the role that both the United States and Saudi Arabia together played in creating many of today’s most pressing political problems, problems that could be best solved if the United States and Saudi Arabia worked together.

One important finding of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the 9/11 commission), the highly effective group appointed to probe the causes of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, is that both Riyadh and Washington “must determine if they can build a relationship that political leaders on both sides are prepared to publicly defend—a relationship about more than oil.”<sup>18</sup> This will be impossible without (1) a common knowledge base about the relationship’s history, (2) a better appreciation for the many ways in which each state has contributed to the foreign policy goals of the other, (3) an unvarnished understanding of the long-term effects of these policies, and (4) more than just a caricature of the very complicated role that oil has played.

Both Saudis and Americans have been markedly uninterested in acknowledging how their own policies have contributed to today's dangerous world. Each finds it easier to shine the spotlight of responsibility on the misdeeds of the other. This has vexed the search for an effective political response. In fact, the fight against al-Qaeda and Islamic radicalism flows directly from policy choices America and its Middle East partners took to win the Cold War and concurrent local political conflicts. Extremism's appeal is not simply the result of a primordial clash of civilizations, nor a political response to globalization, nor even the consequence of authoritarian regimes stifling outlets for peaceful political dissent—the current operating assumption of the Bush administration. Rather, Islamic radicals have been created and cultivated by political leaders for political ends. As the respected Middle East scholar Fred Halliday states, the power of today's Islamist movements is “not a product of the *end* of the Cold War, but a pervasive, influential legacy of *the Cold War itself*.”<sup>19</sup>

The recent focus on Saudi religious zeal has allowed Americans to ignore the role that American policy has played in the problems confronting the post-September 11 world. Afghanistan is the best-known case, with the United States and Saudi Arabia each pouring no less than \$3 billion into a fight that empowered religious extremists. During the 1980s, American leaders believed that bringing down the Soviet Union was worth the costs of empowering religious radicals in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In the words of Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, an early proponent of arming Afghanistan's mujahideen: “What was more important in the world view of history? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet Empire? A few stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?”<sup>20</sup> But Afghanistan is hardly the only case where the politicization of religion was useful in combating the Soviet threat. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a series of Afghanistans dotted the regional landscape, albeit on a smaller scale. In Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, and beyond, Saudi Arabia contributed money either in lieu of or to complement American efforts. Today such places are often the most vexing for counterterrorism experts. In many ways September 11 was the price we paid for winning the Cold War and the strategies we chose. And so are our complicated ties with Saudi Arabia.

Halfway across the globe in Saudi Arabia, the late King Fahd's decision to empower religious extremists inside Saudi Arabia after 1979 also endangered international stability. His policies had as much to do with international threats, viewed similarly by many opposing the Soviet Union, as it did with the long-standing alliance between Saudi Arabia's political and religious establishments. It is true that the political and religious establishments in Saudi Arabia have been allied for over two

centuries. Throughout history, however, the relationship between the two has been much more conflicted than many of today's commentators would have us believe. In fact, the political agenda has tended to dominate the religious one.

This began to change in 1979 with the unfolding of three dramatic events. First, in February 1979 the Iranian revolution brought to power Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shi'a cleric who threatened to spread his version of Islam (as opposed to the Sunni interpretation prevalent in many Arab states) to the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. The Iranian situation took a notably violent turn in November of that year when U.S. hostages were seized. During that same month, a group of Saudi religious extremists seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca, the holiest shrine in Islam. For the first time since the late 1920s, the religious credentials of Saudi Arabia's ruling family were openly contested. Then, weeks later, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, a predominantly Muslim state, in a move that brought the Soviets one step closer to the Persian Gulf. Religion emerged as an obvious and effective counter to the three disparate challenges.<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, all aspects of Saudi Arabian life after 1979 became infused with the spirit of jihad, no longer defined purely as "exertion" or "endeavor" or "struggle" but rather as "holy war."<sup>22</sup> Flyers recruiting religious fighters appeared everywhere. Fiery religious clerics stirred up their followers across the country to volunteer for the fight against the infidels and to pursue a more ascetic life at home. The king regularly appeared with them in public. Women's hairdressing salons were shuttered, women's clubs were closed down, and female announcers were dismissed from their jobs on television. New regulations prohibited girls from continuing their education abroad.<sup>23</sup> As one Saudi journalist described it to me during a 2005 trip to Riyadh, "We are now dealing with the effects of 1979."

The king began pouring money into the region's religious institutions, created years earlier, to contest Iranian influence, beat back the Soviet Union, and bolster his domestic legitimacy. By some accounts Saudi Arabia spent more than \$75 billion underwriting schools, mosques, and charities worldwide.<sup>24</sup> One direct benefit was that this politicization of religion helped check Soviet influence, an advantage not lost on the American leadership. The curse, of course, is that it also poisoned the minds of those who "benefited" from such largesse. Whereas during past conflicts the Saudi leadership had either wiped out religious opposition or negotiated with and subordinated it, in 1979 the king embraced and bolstered the most austere interpretation of Islam.

Like Saudi Arabia's government, many Middle East and South Asian regimes (usually American allies) funded religious opposition in the mid- to late twentieth century for their own political purposes, thus contributing to the intolerant strand of Islamic interpretation the world is today witnessing. In Pakistan between 1971 and 1988 the number of registered religious schools increased from nine hundred to eight thousand, which doesn't include the twenty-five thousand unregistered ones.<sup>25</sup> The trend was greatly accelerated under Pakistan's president Zia ul-Haq, in office from 1978 to 1988. In Egypt during the 1970s President Anwar el-Sadat channeled state money to political-religious groups in order to build his own indigenous pillar of support and to counter the more threatening Nasserist opposition to his rule. Even Israel allowed money to flow to Islamic groups in order to counter the then more threatening national opposition of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Yasser Arafat. But it was Saudi Arabia, with its vast fortune and very real foreign threats, that altered the global course of political Islam. In doing so, it received the tacit approval of the United States.

There is a silver lining to seeing today's challenges as the result of past political decisions. If the problem were Islam or some other basic identity, the situation would be hopeless. A true clash of civilizations would be in the offing, auguring a dark and dangerous future. If, however, the problem is political, then there exists a glimmer of hope. Policies are malleable and can be changed. But it will take time and courage to undo the damage that has been done. It will also require the United States and Saudi Arabia to realign their foreign policies to more effectively address current challenges.

This book will put the high-stakes U.S.-Saudi relationship under the microscope to expose its cracks and fissures. It will look closely at not only American foreign policy but also the woefully underexamined topic of Saudi foreign policy.<sup>26</sup> The book attempts to retrace decisions made by leaders on both sides, and to highlight the different incentives pushing together both leaderships at the uppermost political levels. It is a story of presidents, kings, senior cabinet officials, royal confidants, and chief intelligence officers. Publics on both sides, which have become more influential in the policy process as a result of satellite television and twenty-four-hour news cycles, were for most of this story kept at bay.

But before beginning, we ought to consider the larger political context in which the relationship is now operating. Many of the alliances that have helped steer American foreign policy over the past fifty years are deteriorating. Anti-Americanism has become the flavor of the

decade in the political circles of America's closest friends. Talk to anyone focused on the transatlantic relationship, the crucial partnership between the United States and its European partners, and you will undoubtedly confront stories of anger, frustration, and failing confidence, notwithstanding Secretary Rice's recent efforts to woo European leaders. A 2005 report from the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that "most Europeans surveyed want a more independent approach from the U.S. on security and diplomatic affairs" and that "opinion of the U.S. continues to be mostly unfavorable among the publics of America's traditional allies, except Great Britain and Canada."<sup>27</sup> Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld's description of France and Germany as "old Europe" exacerbated already frayed relations. During his 2002 election campaign, German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder campaigned on an anti-American platform. The chancellor got so far ahead of himself and his own diplomatic corps that he went on record that Germany would not follow America into Iraq, even with a United Nations Security Council resolution. Germany was president of the United Nations Security Council in the days immediately preceding the war.

The situation is hardly better in South Korea, long considered a reliable U.S. partner. In December 2002 hundreds of thousands of South Koreans took to the streets to protest a variety of issues, ranging from acquittal of two American servicemen accused of running over two fourteen-year-old girls with their armored vehicle to American policy toward North Korea. While Korean experts made clear that such protests were not unprecedented, the timing, coinciding with German and Saudi protests, suggests that something very troubling is brewing within many of America's traditional relationships.

It is fair to say that George W. Bush's administration has exacerbated international tensions, but it did not create them. Anti-Americanism has been on the rise since the end of the Cold War.<sup>28</sup> This increase stems in part from controversial American policies but also from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today America is damned if it does and damned if it doesn't. It is criticized for failing to intervene in Chechnya but condemned for invading Iraq. It is criticized for not doing enough to spread democracy and human rights but then rebuked for taking small measures in Egypt or Kuwait to do just that. In interviews and speeches I gave in the late 1990s in the small Arab states that abut the Persian Gulf, I was grilled by dismayed audiences asking when the United States would see fit to rid the region of one of the world's worst monsters, Iraq's Saddam Hussein. When the Bush administration finally ousted Saddam in 2003, it received little public support from all those who knew

better than we how destructive and destabilizing his regime actually was. It seems that everyone wants American intervention until it happens in their own backyard.

Many of the readily understood justifications for America's Cold War relationships no longer apply. Today American decision makers must determine which relationships to sustain, and how to sustain them. The story and future of the U.S.-Saudi relationship is thus a story about how America should understand and realign its relationships in the post-Cold War, post-September 11 world.

# 1

## Oil, God, and Real Estate

Oh Philby,” sighed the king almost beseechingly. “If anyone would offer me a million pounds, I would give him all the concessions he wanted.”<sup>1</sup> In the autumn of 1930 King Abdel Aziz bin Abdel Rahman al-Faisal al-Saud, known in the West as Ibn Saud, could barely sustain his vast territorial holdings—which ranged east to west from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf and north to south from Iraq to Yemen—through traditional sources of revenue including British financial assistance and taxes on the hajj, the traditional Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>2</sup> Hajj revenues were down significantly because of the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1931 the number of pilgrims dropped from a hundred thousand to only forty thousand as travelers from India and Indonesia stopped taking the expensive trip. At the same time, expenditures were increasing. Revenues were needed to pay government salaries, cover army expenses, and keep tribal elders loyal. Early nation-building efforts such as installing radio-telegraph stations across the country and improving Jeddah’s water supply strained the kingdom’s coffers. During these difficult times Abdullah Suleiman, Abdel Aziz’s close aide and the fledgling kingdom’s finance minister, dragged the king’s fortune around in nothing more than a tin trunk, usually doling out more than he took in.

H. St. John Philby, the king’s trusted British confidant, tried to energize his despondent friend. He quoted back to the king a Quranic passage, “God changeth not that which is in people unless they change that which is in themselves.” It was a comforting thought, but what the king really needed was a miracle.

As it turned out, the king’s price was less than a million pounds—£50,000 (\$250,000), to be exact—and a miracle was indeed in the



offing. In return for two interest-free loans payable in gold, Standard Oil of California (Socal, later Chevron) would win Saudi Arabia's oil concession in 1933, strike oil in 1938, and transform the desperately poor, newly fashioned kingdom into one of the most important countries in the world.

## **Black Gold**

The story of America's relationship with Saudi Arabia begins with oil, first established as a strategically vital commodity in the days prior to World War I. Winston Churchill, then the most senior civilian representing the British Royal Navy, oversaw a series of programs to convert Britain's fleet from coal to oil. The switch made the British fleet a faster, more agile counter to the increasingly adversarial German navy. But without its own indigenous oil supply, Britain's conversion irrevocably tied it to the Persian Gulf, its cheapest source of oil.<sup>3</sup>

World War I would highlight the strategic importance of oil. In 1916 it spurred Germany's invasion of Romania, a minor global oil power but at the time Europe's largest producer outside of Russia. It also fueled the newly introduced military tank, which increased the flexibility of British forces against the rail-bound German army. The petroleum-dependent tank, used dramatically in the summer of 1918 at the battle of Amiens, ended the "primacy of the defense," which had paralyzed European forces inside muddy trenches for most of the war.<sup>4</sup> By the war's end, British army vehicles included 56,000 trucks, 23,000 motorcars, and 34,000 motorcycles and motor bicycles, all powered by gasoline. As oil historian Daniel Yergin rightly describes it: "The victory of the Allies over Germany was in some ways the victory of the truck over the locomotive." Oil was central to this success.

Because 80 percent of the Allies' oil during the war came from Standard Oil of New Jersey (later Exxon) in the United States, U.S. officials worried that their country would run out of the precious commodity. One United States senator grew so concerned that he called for the U.S. Navy to revert from oil to coal. The director of the U.S. Geological Survey described the American oil situation as "precarious." Shortly after the war, American oil executives and government officials turned their attention to newly promising oil fields around the Persian Gulf.

But in the Gulf, American oil companies confronted a virtual British monopoly on access to foreign oil fields, backed by Britain's fierce determination to retain its exclusionary position in places such as Iran, Iraq, and the smaller Gulf States. "The British position is

impregnable,” boasted British oil man E. Mackay Edgar in the 1919 summer edition of *Sperling’s Journal*, an economic journal of that time. “All the known oil fields, all the likely or probable oil fields outside of the United States itself, are in British hands or under British management or control, or financed by British capital.”<sup>5</sup>

There appeared to be only two ways for American companies to break the British stranglehold: either gain access to Britain’s exclusive Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), which held most of the concessions in the Middle East states of the former Ottoman Empire, or proceed independently, outside the IPC framework. Big oil companies such as Standard Oil of New Jersey and Socony-Vacuum Oil Company (later Mobil) pursued the first course. Backed by the U.S. Department of State, which found it intolerable that U.S. companies were denied economic access anywhere by its former World War I allies, the oil companies embarked on arduous negotiations with the owners of IPC. The State Department advocated an “open door policy” that would allow American companies access to an area circumscribed on a map by a red line encompassing most of the old Ottoman Empire, including Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and most of the lands along the Persian Gulf’s western shores.<sup>6</sup> In 1929, with U.S. government help, Standard Oil of New Jersey and Socony-Vacuum joined IPC and were granted a combined 23.75 percent share. Remaining shares were distributed evenly between British Petroleum, Royal Dutch/Shell, and Compagnie Française Pétrole, a state-owned firm established in 1924 to represent French interests in IPC.

Now signatories to the Red Line Agreement, as it was then called, American oil companies had finally penetrated the Middle East. In joining IPC, however, the companies had to sign on to a stringent pre-existing arrangement: members agreed they would not embark on independent exploration or cut any deals inside the red line without the express approval and cooperation of the other members of IPC.

This “self-denying clause” had the unintended consequence of keeping the British, and most major American companies, out of Saudi Arabia during the crucial years of the 1930s. With an increasing oil supply coming onto the market and no corresponding upsurge in world demand anticipated, IPC shied away from new deals or concessions that would increase the global oil supply and thus reduce prices. In the early 1930s the American company Gulf Oil won a concession to explore for oil in Bahrain, a tiny island off the Arabian Peninsula, but relinquished it when it joined IPC. IPC restrictions demanded that no independent drilling could take place by IPC members, and no member wanted to begin jointly drilling in Bahrain.

Standard Oil of California followed the second course available to international oil companies in the Middle East. It chose to operate outside of IPC restrictions, which increased its autonomy but kept it from the more lucrative IPC-controlled areas such as Iraq. Socal bought Gulf Oil's Bahrain concession for \$50,000. This purchase significantly altered the future course of U.S.-Saudi relations.

In 1932 Standard Oil of California struck oil in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia, situated less than twenty miles away and displaying a similar geological profile, suddenly appeared as a potential oil producer. Until that time, no major oil company had taken much interest in the kingdom. With the Bahrain discovery, that began to change.

King Abdel Aziz, now courted by Socal and IPC for rights to explore and drill for oil, did not expect the companies to find much of anything under his sandy lands.<sup>7</sup> A few years earlier he had awarded a concession to a New Zealander by the name of Frank Holmes, with little result. Unable to convince any major oil company to invest in his Saudi project, Holmes faced bankruptcy. He departed the kingdom owing Abdel Aziz £6,000. Still, the cash-strapped monarch was not about to turn away IPC or Socal, both of which were now seeking an oil concession.<sup>8</sup>

Socal was aided in its concession negotiations by St. John Philby. Once a member of Britain's Foreign Office, Philby was deeply distrustful of his own government's imperial designs on Saudi Arabia. After playing IPC and Socal off each other in order to ensure the king a good price, Philby passed to the king proprietary information that he had gathered from IPC negotiators. It seemed that IPC's primary goal in obtaining the concession was not to make money for Saudi Arabia, or itself for that matter, but rather to keep Socal out of the Middle East oil hunt. Because of the global oil glut, IPC did not intend to explore for oil if it won the Saudi concession. This hardly endeared IPC to the impoverished king. Philby also withheld from IPC Socal's final offer to the king, thus denying IPC negotiators the opportunity to outbid their adversary.

In 1933 the king—who was partial to the Americans anyway, given their success in Bahrain and their apparent disinterest in Middle East colonial intervention—awarded Socal the concession. In return, the company agreed to provide the king with a £30,000 interest-free loan in gold and a second loan of £20,000 within eighteen months. Saudi Arabia agreed to pay back the loan in future oil revenue if it ever materialized. The king also secured an annual payment of £5,000. "Put your trust in God and sign!" King Abdel Aziz exhorted Abdullah Suleiman, the second most powerful man in the fledgling government.<sup>9</sup>

The Saudi concession, roughly the size of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona combined, was the only important oil concession in the Middle East that was exclusively American-owned and operated. Shortly thereafter a handful of Socal employees landed on Saudi Arabia's eastern shore. They included men such as the burly and "much loved" Max Steineke, a savvy geologist who could identify oil fields from Saudi Arabia's challenging landscape, and Floyd W. Ohliger, Socal's superintendent of Arabian operation. Both were "good eggs," according to Thomas C. Barger, who arrived shortly after the others and eventually rose to head the oil company's impressive government relations department and then the entire Arabian-based company. Barger himself came to Saudi Arabia in December 1937 on a rickety barge from Bahrain, disembarked at a half-finished pier at Khobar, then just a small fishing village, and drove six miles along an oiled road to Dhahran, the hot and rugged company town. Barger, who had cut his teeth as a professional geologist around the rough-and-tumble copper mines of Butte, Montana, was assigned to assist Steineke in his geological pursuit. "I'm awfully glad to have you here with us," Steineke enthused when Barger arrived. "I don't know what I am going to do with you, but I am certainly glad to have you on board." Barger's Arabic eventually became so fluent that he was occasionally mistaken for a Bedouin, an Arab nomad. After witnessing Barger's language proficiency, the king blurted out, "*Mashallah!*"—a phrase expressing wonderment and amazement.<sup>10</sup>

Almost immediately, Socal's newly formed and wholly owned subsidiary, the California Arabian Standard Oil Company (Casoc), faced a quandary. If the company's investment in Saudi Arabia's fields paid off and the company struck oil, it would not have markets available to sell its product to. Fiercely competitive, IPC denied Casoc access to its markets. Partly as a result of this, Casoc merged in 1936 with Texas Oil—a company that had markets in Asia but only a limited supply of American oil to service it. Together in 1944 the two companies renamed their subsidiary the Arab American Company (Aramco), which would become a principal actor in U.S.-Saudi relations.

Between 1933 and 1938 Casoc struggled. The landscape proved difficult to decipher, and no one was quite sure how deep the oil was located, or even if there was any. The Americans began drilling at an area called Dammam, a few miles north of Dhahran. The first holes produced little of note; on occasion the wells showed traces of oil, but not enough to give them commercial value. The seventh hole proved a different story. On March 4, 1938, after a series of disappointing drills, Saudi Arabia's Dammam-7 well "blew," producing more than 1,500 barrels per day. At the time, an average U.S. well produced about 100

barrels per day, although Saudi Arabia's neighbor, Bahrain, was producing a total of 13,000 barrels per day.<sup>11</sup> Still, Saudi Arabia now had one commercially viable well and its future as an oil producer appeared bright.

The Dammam-7 blow corresponded with a visit to Dhahran by Princess Alice, the granddaughter of Britain's Queen Victoria, and her husband, the Earl of Athlone, the brother of Queen Mary. Both had crossed the entire width of Arabia from Jeddah in a sort of goodwill tour. For the Americans, isolated from much of civilization in eastern Saudi Arabia, the arrival of royalty overshadowed the excitement of the oil discovery. Although those involved did not realize it at the time, the visit of Princess Alice, corresponding as it did with the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia, foreshadowed the handover of British influence in the Gulf to the Americans. The cordial letters that later passed between the princess and Dhahran's American women, discussing among other things an angel food cake recipe, preceded a higher-stakes and much terser set of letters exchanged six years later between Roosevelt and Churchill arguing over whether the United States was seeking to "deprive" Britain of its oil assets or whether Britain was trying to "horn in" on Casoc's Saudi oil concession.<sup>12</sup>

The 1938 oil discovery and subsequent finds shocked and delighted King Abdel Aziz. His first royalty check topped \$1.5 million. Months later, on May 1, 1939, the king, along with a retinue of more than two thousand people in five hundred automobiles, journeyed out to the eastern oil fields and turned the spigot that began the flow of oil into the first tankers. On the return trip, the king, along with some of his brothers and older sons, boisterously sang Bedouin raiding songs from their youth.<sup>13</sup> Impressed with American ingenuity and seeming to genuinely like the American oil workers, the king augmented Casoc's concession by nearly 80,000 square miles, increasing Casoc's area to about 440,000 square miles, a little over 50 percent of Saudi territory.<sup>14</sup> "Do you know what they will find when they reach Mars?" the king asked Tom Barger after he had heard a radio report predicting that men would someday travel to the distant planet. He then proceeded to answer his own question: "They will find Americans out there in the desert hunting for oil."<sup>15</sup>

In 1939 Casoc produced approximately 11,000 barrels per day. Ten years later that number hovered around 477,000 barrels, accounting for slightly more than 5 percent of total world production and about 35 percent of all Middle East production.<sup>16</sup>

Oil would play an even larger role in World War II than it had in World War I, as new technologies demanded ever more "black gold."

Cordell Hull, Franklin D. Roosevelt's secretary of state for most of his presidency, acknowledged that "the Near East, in which our government had evinced only a slight interest for a century and a half, became through the demand of WWII a vital area in the conduct of our foreign relations. . . . Iran (once known to us as Persia), Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Syria began to appear more and more in American print, not as lands of the ancients but as cogs in the machine of war."<sup>17</sup> In Saudi Arabia, the United States had important interests to protect, "principally the vast oil concession."<sup>18</sup>

World War II had a direct impact on oil development in eastern Arabia. Oil's importance was obvious. But the machinery needed to get it out of the ground was required elsewhere. Spare parts, trucks, and other equipment were requisitioned for the war effort. One boat filled with crucial parts sank en route to the Eastern Province, where Saudi Arabia's oil resources were located. Then in November 1940 Italian planes bombed the oil fields in Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia. Although the bombs somehow missed both sites' oil fields, and Benito Mussolini later publicly apologized for the attack, it was enough to scare Casoc's employees and spur many to return home. The camp of 371 American employees, 38 wives, and 16 children decreased in size in the weeks after the bombing to only 226 employees, 19 wives, and 5 children. Eight months later the camp emptied of its remaining women and children as German troops threatened to converge on Dhahran from El-Alamein, Egypt, in the west and the Caucasus in the north.<sup>19</sup> Promising Saudi fields such as the ones at Abu Hadriya and al-Abqaiq were left for future probing if and when the political situation stabilized.

In 1948, after the war's end, Aramco's drillers (Casoc was renamed Aramco in 1944) returned to a site that had long fascinated Max Steineke and other Aramco geologists. The company struck oil at Ghawar, southwest of Dhahran and east of Riyadh. The Ghawar field was soon classified as the world's largest oil deposit. Saudi Arabia was now on the map as a very serious oil player. In need of even more markets and capital given the vastly expanding Saudi output, Aramco was joined by Standard Oil of New Jersey and Socony-Vacuum, which slipped out of their IPC contracts on a technicality in November 1948. One of the king's only conditions was that whatever the face of the bigger company, it had to be 100 percent American, rather than include European (particularly British) companies. He did not trust European designs on his country.

Between 1944 and 1950 Aramco's gross production of crude oil increased from 21,000 to 548,000 barrels of oil per day.<sup>20</sup> Cheap Persian Gulf oil became a central component of America's postwar strategy, as the reconstruction of Europe depended on it. In 1948 the United States

imported only about 6 percent of its oil, with only about 8 percent of that coming from Saudi Arabia.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Western Europe was almost entirely dependent on Persian Gulf oil. U.S. planners busily determined how best to ensure its flow.

The U.S. government by and large took a backseat to Aramco's relations with Riyadh. The State Department let Aramco take the lead in interacting with the Saudi government, particularly around oil and local development issues. In the early days of the relationship Aramco handled oil, while the embassy (after it was established) handled politics, including the fallout from America's 1947 decision to support the partition of Palestine and difficulties in managing Saudi-British tensions given Washington's warm relations with both. The arrangement was partly a result of Aramco's legacy in the kingdom, but it also fit nicely with the determined efforts of successive U.S. administrations to stay out of local politics rather than re-create Britain and France's colonial experience.

This division of labor between the U.S. government and U.S. oil companies was evident in how America's diplomatic and economic interests were physically located inside the kingdom. Aramco dominated eastern Saudi Arabia and the majority of oil issues that emerged from there. The U.S. embassy operated out of Jeddah, on Saudi Arabia's west coast, and handled most of the nettlesome foreign policy issues from there. Aramco kept the State Department and CIA apprised of its initiatives, but it largely operated independent of official U.S. channels. Over time, however, especially as ownership of Aramco passed to Saudi Arabia over the course of the 1970s and the American economy became increasingly dependent on Saudi oil, the U.S. government took a more dominant role in U.S.-Saudi relations.

### **America's Three Pillars**

Oil, of course, is a significant factor in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, as it is in all other Saudi dealings. It can hardly be otherwise for a country that sits astride one-quarter of the world's proven oil resources and relies on oil exports for 90 to 95 percent of its total export earnings.<sup>22</sup> But while oil explains a good portion of America's interest in the kingdom, it does not explain the strength of the relationship. After all, America's relationships with other major oil-producing states such as Russia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Venezuela have been exceedingly troubled. Politically and militarily, the United States and Soviet Union were at odds for the entire Cold War period. For thirty of the thirty-six years between 1967 and 2003, the United States had no official political



relations with Iraq, a country whose oil holdings are estimated at 115 billion barrels of proven reserves, second only to Saudi Arabia. Iran, with 10 percent of the world's oil, has lived under U.S. sanctions for twenty-five years. Libya experienced nineteen years of American-led sanctions. In 2002 the Bush administration quietly encouraged an unsuccessful extralegal effort to remove Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez. In the fall of 2004, the United States actively encouraged international sanctions against Sudan's oil exports in response to egregious human rights abuses taking place in that country. Successive administrations have shown a clear willingness to bear the costs of poor relations with oil-rich states.

It is true that Saudi Arabia's ability to bear the cost of maintaining spare oil capacity and its willingness to put oil onto the market in times of crisis give it a unique standing among producers. It is the world's "swing producer" and has a disproportionate influence over global oil prices. Saudi Arabia holds around 85 percent of OPEC's spare capacity, which, given problems in Iraq, Venezuela, Nigeria, and elsewhere, has come to mean about 85 percent of the world's spare capacity.<sup>23</sup> If any single problem hits a big producer elsewhere (Iraq descends further into chaos, Nigeria's political situation devolves, Venezuelan oil workers strike, hurricanes damage U.S. oil facilities), the only place that has been able to quickly make up those volumes is Saudi Arabia. Still, American policies of sanctioning and cutting off relations with other oil producers have reinforced Saudi Arabia's position. Good U.S.-Saudi relations have given Washington decision makers the latitude to curtail the production of others. This then begs the question of why relations were so good in the first place.

When it comes to the Middle East, America's relationship with Saudi Arabia is more similar to its relationships with Egypt (after 1973), Jordan, and even Israel (politically friendly but oil-poor) than to its ties with Iran, Iraq, or Libya (traditionally hostile but oil-rich). Thus when Thomas Friedman states in the pages of the *New York Times* that the United States has treated Arab oil-producing states "like big, dumb gas stations, and all the U.S. cared about was that they kept their pumps open and their prices low," he misses a good portion of the politics and political context of the past half century.<sup>24</sup> Oil by itself does not explain why, in the late 1950s, the United States sought to transform the Saudi king into a globally recognized Muslim leader. The Saudi leadership's claim to Mecca and Medina and the importance this had for America's anti-Communist agenda is a more powerful explanation. Oil hardly explains why relations between the two countries became exceptionally close during in the 1980s, even as Saudi debts began to mount and oil prices fell dramatically. Mutual interest in countering Soviet expansion provides a better accounting. Most importantly, oil alone does not anti-



cipate the kingdom's spending billions of dollars on anti-Communist activity around the globe, decisions that were not preordained by its resource holdings but were greatly valued in Washington. As *Newsweek* reported in 1978:

It is the Saudis using their oil money as an ideological weapon, who have scored the most significant foreign policy successes in recent years. By funneling \$2.5 billion into the Egyptian economy each year, Saudi Arabia has been able to rid a key Arab country of Soviet influence. By pumping large doses of cash into Morocco, Riyadh's rulers helped check a Marxist movement in the Maghreb and enabled the Moroccans to help Zaire, another Saudi client state, turn back an invasion launched by the Communist rebels.<sup>25</sup>

That Saudi Arabia had money to spend is directly attributable to oil. How it chose to spend it is not. "God help us if we couldn't count these people among our closest allies," said one senior American diplomat in Riyadh during this time.<sup>26</sup> Riyadh's willingness to invest its revenue in American-supported causes earned it considerable favor at the highest levels in Washington.

To understand why and how the United States and Saudi Arabia became such close partners over the course of the last half century, two factors other than oil must also be considered: strategic location and religious identity. Saudi Arabia's claim to speak for Muslims worldwide and the legitimacy the Saudi leadership derived from its own religious establishment ensured that anti-Communism figured prominently in the Saudi decision calculus, something U.S. leaders greatly appreciated. Saudi Arabia's strategic location and religious identity, especially the latter, conditioned how American policy makers came to define their oil interests and the policies that emerged from them.

A singular focus on oil misses the way in which a broader convergence of interests helped to cement the relationship between the United States and the Saudis during the Cold War. It also overlooks the genesis of a number of problems that decision makers are grappling with today. Until the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, Saudi Arabia's extensive proselytizing of a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam—commonly referred to as Wahhabi Islam outside of Saudi Arabia—was not a source of considerable concern because it had an anti-Communist justification. For Saudi Arabia, America provided security, markets, and a shared antipathy toward Communist expansion—something that threatened Saudi borders directly, indirectly through proxies such as Egypt and Yemen, and through subversion of the population. Mutually supporting interests gave leaders on both sides opportunities to weave their way through complicated international situations and benefit

from the support of the other. The U.S.-Saudi relationship became a testing ground for how Washington would apply varying Cold War policies in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup>

### **Location, Location, Location**

During World War II, the Persian Gulf provided an important staging ground for resupplying the desperate Russians, then allies of the United States. The Arabian Peninsula was also located along the logistical route for supplying troops fighting Japan. America's War Department was an early and strong advocate of building Saudi Arabia's Dhahran airfield, first proposed in 1944 in order to shorten the air route to the Pacific theater. Dhahran provided a much-needed stop between Libya and Karachi. A year earlier, in 1943, the State Department anticipated the War Department's interests and advocated extending lend-lease assistance—a World War II program that authorized the president to transfer food, military services, and industrial parts to countries considered vital to American national security—to Saudi Arabia. As Dean G. Acheson argued:

Saudi Arabia lies between the vital Red Sea and Persian Gulf shipping routes and across the direct air route to India and the Far East. The Government of Saudi Arabia has been highly sympathetic to the cause of the United Nations [Allied forces] and has accorded United States Army aircraft the right to fly over certain uninhabited zones of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the Army may at any time wish to obtain extensive air facilities in Saudi Arabia. However, the Department is of the opinion that it will be difficult to obtain additional privileges from the Government of Saudi Arabia unless we are prepared to furnish certain direct assistance to that country.<sup>28</sup>

The State Department was aided by American oil officials in the kingdom who pressed Harold L. Ickes, the secretary of the interior, to find a way to counter British foreign aid to the kingdom, lest the British steal away the American concession. James F. Byrnes, President Roosevelt's director of the Office of War Mobilization from May 1943 until April 1945, testified that FDR had "determined that in view of the strategic location of Saudi Arabia, the important oil resources of that country and the prestige of King Ibn Saud throughout the Arab world, the defense of Saudi Arabia was vital to the defense of the United States."<sup>29</sup> Saudi Arabia became one of only three Arab countries to be designated eligible for lend-lease assistance.

After the war, the commercial value of the Dhahran airfield, near the Dammam oil fields, increased as Egypt's Payne Field was turned over to Egyptian control and Trans World Airways began using Dhahran as a hub between Europe and growing markets in South and East Asia. In 1946 the *New York Times* reported that the potential strategic value of the base was "enormous because of its geographical position and indefinite possibilities for expansion as well as its ability to handle any size aircraft."<sup>30</sup> A military survey team that was sent to Saudi Arabia in the autumn of 1949 reported that training a small Saudi military force as part of the Dhahran leasing agreement would "be a useful force for our purposes in the event of war with Russia."<sup>31</sup> In 1951 the National Security Council articulated its views on what made the area so important. In order of priority, the report listed the geographic position of the area (with respect to the Mediterranean, Western Europe, Africa, and European and Asiatic Russia), oil resources, military bases, and communications and facilities.<sup>32</sup>

During the Cold War the importance of Dhahran again increased, given that it was within a thousand miles—striking distance—of the Soviet Union. According to Parker "Pete" T. Hart, America's venerable ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the early 1960s, "Dhahran was of potential value as a strategic backup—a hinterland in the evolving security structure that in 1955 became the Baghdad Pact."<sup>33</sup> During the 1980s Dhahran served as a transit hub for American-procured weapons headed for Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia would become even more important after 1979, when the Iranian revolution removed from American orbit one of the twin pillars it relied on for regional security. Under President Richard M. Nixon, Saudi Arabia was to act as a junior partner to Iran in preserving stability over the Persian Gulf and the region. Once Iran could no longer be counted on, the Reagan administration came to rely on Saudi Arabia to serve as a bulwark against Iranian expansion and Russian meddling.

Finally, permission for the American military to fly over Saudi territory and pre-position material in the Persian Gulf region has been a valued asset. During the Cold War the denial of air space to the Soviet Union was very important to U.S. planners. Even today military planners view access to Saudi airspace as "essential" to all operations in the region.<sup>34</sup> The U.S. military has no viable cost-efficient alternative to flying over Saudi Arabia. There are not enough tanker aircraft or bases to easily avoid flying over the kingdom. America's heavy reliance on the small Persian Gulf states would also be rendered irrelevant without tacit Saudi support.

## Finding Religion

In addition to oil and geography, America has since the dawn of the Cold War valued Saudi Arabia's religiosity. In a neat division of labor, Saudis attacked godlessness while Americans fought Communism. Because Soviet-inspired Communism was based on a hostility toward religious belief, the more religious a country, the more likely it would be to rail against Communism and look toward the United States. As early as 1954 historian Bernard Lewis predicted that "pious Muslims—and most Muslims are pious—will not long tolerate an atheist creed."<sup>35</sup> Saudi Arabia, a deeply religious state, was the perfect prophylactic against the spread of Communism and a natural American partner.

"Who is testing you in China? Who is testing you in Japan? Who is testing you in Germany?" Abdel Aziz rhetorically asked one of President Truman's emissaries in 1948.<sup>36</sup> The answer, of course, was the Soviets. The king was clear that he "would never abandon his people or his religion" to it. His religion, and his role as ruler of Islam's two holiest mosques, dictated an anti-Communist stance.

Initially during the early 1930s, Prince Faisal, the king's second-oldest living son, explored the possibility of establishing ties with the Soviet Union. Moscow was in fact the first capital to officially recognize his father's newly founded state. But King Abdel Aziz wanted little to do with the Soviets and banished the Soviet ambassador from Jeddah in 1938. Official relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia were not reestablished until 1990. Faisal eventually became one of the most intensely anti-Communist warriors American leaders would find. He concocted a wild conspiracy theory that intimately connected Communism and Zionism. "Communism . . . is a Zionist creation designed to fulfill the aims of Zionism," he told *Newsweek* in 1970. "They are only pretending to work against each other."<sup>37</sup> Although a succession of American presidents, secretaries of state, and senior oil executives would raise their eyebrows when confronted with Faisal's convoluted theory, his earnest hatred of America's mortal foe largely caused them to hold their tongue.

The benefits of Saudi Arabia's religiosity to the United States were real. During the Cold War religiosity was synonymous with anti-Communism. In the 1950s the words "under God" were added to the Pledge of Allegiance to differentiate the United States from the Soviet Union. During the 1960s senators such as Tennessee's Albert A. Gore Sr. (former Vice President Gore's father) asked witnesses appearing before Congress whether they believed in God, on the grounds that if they answered affirmatively they could not be Communist.<sup>38</sup> Religion was

integral to the debate, and a religiously inspired state was a natural global partner.

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, toured the Middle East, he brought letters of introduction from Eisenhower to the leaders in the region. Of these letters, the one written to the Saudi king, Abdel Aziz, was the only one to mention a shared interest in fighting "godless communism."<sup>39</sup> American presidents also hoped that religious Saudi Arabia could serve as a counter to the more revolutionary secular nationalism that swept through the region in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In 1954, Gamal Abdel Nasser assumed the reins of power in Egypt and mobilized citizens across the Arab world to throw off the shackles of colonialism and old-fashioned monarchical rule and embrace an Arab republican national identity. Nasser hurled invectives against the French, British, Saudis, and Jordanians, and eventually the Americans. He also received considerable Soviet aid. During the late 1950s President Eisenhower encouraged Saudi Arabia's King Saud (reigned 1953–64) to become a political and religious counter to the charismatic Nasser, and the White House began referring to King Saud somewhat optimistically as "an Islamic pope." Such shared interests established a strong foundation that supported close relations at the highest political levels for decades. It was done at the expense of democratization, human rights, and the promotion of religious freedom, goals that drove American policies elsewhere.

### **The View from Riyadh**

Washington's interests in Saudi Arabia boiled down to oil, God, and real estate. But why did Saudi Arabia choose America? Why did King Abdel Aziz award American companies Saudi Arabia's major oil concessions only a year after he formally declared the patchwork of political alliances and military victories the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia? Why did he turn to the American military in 1946 to build his country's first major airfield? Why did he seek American companies and foundations to build Saudi Arabia's education and economic institutions, rather than those of other interested and experienced countries? The answer says much about why successive Saudi Arabian leaders have similarly turned to the United States, year after year, crisis after crisis. It also lies deeply in the kingdom's history.

The roots of modern Saudi Arabia stretch back to 1744 and the desert town of Diriyah, just outside of Riyadh. It was there, deep in the Nejd, the central province of Arabia, that Muhammad ibn Saud, a local

potentate and patriarch of the House of Saud (and a direct forefather of today's rulers), and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an ascetic religious cleric committed to a literal interpretation of the Quran, swore an oath of allegiance. The area that in 1932 came to be called Saudi Arabia was then under nominal Ottoman control. While the Ottomans were active on the desert's periphery, they mostly ignored the peninsula's harsh interior. Warring Bedouin tribes populated its vast desert tracts. It was hardly worth Ottoman effort to assert greater political control.

The alliance between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab proved potent. For seventy years they and their descendants recorded victories and converts as far north as Karbala, Iraq, and Damascus, Syria. They pushed deep into Yemen and into the Hejaz, Arabia's western province and home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. It was the behavior of the zealous soldiers in the Hejaz that caused their downfall. The followers of Abd al-Wahhab terrorized the residents of Mecca and Medina for not practicing the ascetic version of Islam of the warriors. They attacked and turned away Muslims making the hajj who practiced Islam in a different manner. This enraged Muslims throughout the area and unnerved the Ottomans, who benefited from taxes generated during the hajj. The Ottomans, already in decline, encouraged Muhammad Ali, their Egyptian proxy, to do battle on their behalf against the troublemakers from Diriyah. In 1818, after a decade's worth of fighting, Muhammad Ali defeated the Nejd warriors and pushed them back to their home base of Diriyah. This marked the end of the first Saudi state.

No sooner had they been defeated than the descendants of Muhammad ibn Saud began organizing to reassert their rule. They retained their alliance with the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (commonly referred to collectively as "Al al-Sheikh"), though now placing limits on their missionary zeal. The area they eventually conquered, which constituted the second Saudi state, was smaller than the original; this time its rulers stayed clear of Mecca and Medina, the area that had antagonized the Ottomans and other Muslims the first time around. Still, seventy years later, in 1884, the Saud/Al al-Sheikh alliance was once again defeated, this time by a local tribal leader, Muhammad ibn Rashid, who was nominally backed by the Ottoman Empire. Ibn Rashid's victory was facilitated by incessant internal bickering among the al-Saud family, which irrevocably weakened the second Saudi state. Ibn Rashid stripped away possessions and claims but did allow Abdullah al-Faisal al-Saud, then the head of the al-Saud clan, to continue on as governor of Riyadh. His brother Abdel Rahman al-Faisal al-Saud succeeded him. When Abdel Rahman revolted against

Rashid domination in 1891, his forces were decimated and he fled to Kuwait. He took with him his young son Abdel Aziz, the future king of Saudi Arabia.

The young Abdel Aziz absorbed the lesson, painfully learned by his father and uncle, of how devastating unresolved internal political tensions could be. When he eventually became king, he insisted on his sons' fealty and drummed into them a loyalty to each other and an obsessive commitment to keeping interfamilial disagreements private that is readily apparent even today.

Abdel Aziz spent his formative years exiled in Kuwait, learning international politics at the knee of its ruler, Emir Mubarak. Kuwait at the time was a relatively cosmopolitan area, located on a trade route that attracted Christians, Jews, Indians, Arabs, British, and others. Unlike his ancestors, Abdel Aziz was introduced to both foreigners and non-Wahhabi Muslims. He studiously observed Emir Mubarak, a savvy politician, artfully balance Ottoman and British territorial claims, a lesson that the young Saudi internalized and later practiced.<sup>40</sup>

While living in Kuwait, Abdel Aziz never gave up his claim to his ancestral home. In 1902 Abdel Aziz's men, sixty-three in total, approached Riyadh. A few, led by Abdel Aziz, penetrated the city's walls. Abdel Aziz's cousin Abdullah bin Jiluwi threw a dagger at the local governor but missed. Abdel Aziz sprung out, grabbed the governor, and kicked him in the groin. As the Rashid governor stumbled away, Abdullah ran him down and murdered him. In time, King Abdel Aziz appointed Abdullah bin Jiluwi the governor of Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province. His descendants maintained the post until riots broke out there in 1979. Thus began the formative years of today's Saudi Arabia, the third Saudi state.

After the attack, Abdel Aziz began a protracted effort to expand his realm in all directions. He drew his strength from the towns that dotted the Nejd. To promote his rule, he also set about subduing the Bedouins, whose incessant raiding throughout central Arabia had prevented the development of any sustained commerce or socioeconomic development in the region. To encourage them to settle permanently, he sent money, seeds, and other agricultural support to a series of villages to attract wandering Bedouins and encourage them to forgo raiding and their itinerant lifestyle. The first hijrah (Bedouin settlement) was established in early 1912, and there would eventually be 120 or more. Abdel Aziz encouraged their development in order to harness the destructive power of the Bedouin tribes and bend them to his rule. He employed a long-term strategy of proselytization in order to curb the violent practices of the Bedouins.<sup>41</sup>



To these settlements Abdel Aziz also sent religious teachers to inculcate the rough residents with an extremely ascetic interpretation of the Quran and an intense desire to return to a life replicating exactly that of the Prophet Muhammad. As new converts often are, the Ikhwan, as members of the new Bedouin fighting force were called, were religiously resolute and fanatical.<sup>42</sup> Some even went so far as to challenge Abdel Aziz for his contact with outside powers and his seemingly lenient religious interpretations (although Abdel Aziz had been schooled in religion by a direct descendant of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab). Hafiz Wahba, Abdel Aziz's representative to the British, recalls that the king "dealt with this by raising an 'army' of scholars well versed in religious debate to go out to the different hijrahs to repair the mischief wrought by the earlier teachers, whom he promptly dismissed. He [however] was not able to eradicate fanaticism entirely."<sup>43</sup> Still, as one scholar of the movement acknowledges, "the unalterable fact is that [the Ikhwan] did what they did not out of inherent cruelty and maliciousness, but as the logical result of their religious training at the hands of people who should have and probably did know better."<sup>44</sup>

From these settled Bedouin villages, which included subsets of existing tribes, Abdel Aziz raised a powerful religious fighting force that supplemented his core fighters.<sup>45</sup> In a heavily tribal environment such as Arabia, what was notable about the Ikhwan was their loyalty to each other rather than to their tribe more generally, and this was something that Abdel Aziz actively cultivated.<sup>46</sup> Zealously religious, they sought to spread their interpretation of Islam—Wahhabi Islam. They were a violent and determined group.

Whereas raiding was a fact of life on the peninsula, certain long-standing norms applied. Raiders looted but rarely pillaged. Unless there was an existing blood rivalry, killings were rare, especially of women and children. The Ikhwan, however, disregarded such norms. They ransacked villages and murdered those whom they deemed insufficiently pious. They were after purity, not plunder.<sup>47</sup>

With the help of the Ikhwan (who at the time made up a small but growing portion of Abdel Aziz's fighters), loyal townsmen, the core of his army, and local tribes, the future king brought Hasa, the eastern portion of Saudi Arabia (now called the Eastern Province), under his command.<sup>48</sup> With eight thousand men, Abdel Aziz overran a small Turkish garrison there in 1913. The Ikhwan fighters involved were only too happy to conquer Hasa, as they viewed the largely Shi'a population there as apostates. They scorned Abdel Aziz's victory pledge to the population that he would allow them some freedom to practice their religion as they always had.



The British grew increasingly enamored of Abdel Aziz's growing strength and military prowess, although they maintained closer ties with Sharif Hussein, the ruler of Mecca, Medina, and the rest of the Hejaz.<sup>49</sup> In 1916 London offered Abdel Aziz a monthly subsidy of £5,000 and a shipment of machine guns and rifles. This augmented the three hundred rifles and 10,000 rupees that the British had provided Abdel Aziz a year earlier to help him overcome a tribal revolt.<sup>50</sup> Abdel Aziz was now formally receiving protection from the British, something he had been courting for over a decade. In return for protection, the British expected Abdel Aziz to resist Ottoman entreaties and harass, if not defeat, the Ottoman-supported Ibn Rashid.<sup>51</sup> The British remained neutral in the Arabian contest between the Hashemite leader in the west and Abdel Aziz in the Nejd, both of whom were friendly with the British crown.

After Hasa, Abdel Aziz returned his attention to the Turkish-backed Rashid clan to defeat them once and for all at the town of Hail in 1921. (In what was his usual fashion, the king married a Rashidi girl to minimize the chances that the family's descendants would come back to fight another day. Their son, Abdullah, is today the king of Saudi Arabia.) But at Hail, fissures that already existed between Abdel Aziz and the Ikhwan became even more apparent. The Ikhwan viewed fighting the Rashid clan as a distraction. They wanted to focus efforts on the Shi'a of Hasa, and they wanted the Hejaz, the home of Mecca and Medina. Religion, not Abdel Aziz's second-order political agenda against the Rashid clan, motivated the Ikhwan. As Mutluq al-Sur, the right-hand man of one of the Ikhwan's most notorious leaders, recalled, it was at this point that he began questioning the religious conviction of Abdel Aziz. "It was in 1920 at the siege of Hail by the Imam [Abdel Aziz] that I first found out that we were political tools."<sup>52</sup>

More trouble arose with the Ikhwan when Abdel Aziz conquered the Hejaz in 1924. With the victory, Abdel Aziz sent packing the Hejaz's historical rulers, the British-backed Hashemites, direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. The Hashemites lost considerable international support when their leader, Sharif Hussein of Mecca (who eventually fled the kingdom and whose great-great-grandson Abdullah is today the king of Jordan), declared himself caliph (leader of the worldwide Muslim community). His move antagonized Egypt's King Fouad, who sought the title for himself; the Saudi Ikwahn, who interpreted the move as a direct challenge to Abdel Aziz; Muslims in India, who were themselves divided over whom to support; and others who opposed Sharif Hussein for any number of reasons.<sup>53</sup> Rampant corruption and increasing heavy-handedness also alienated the local population, causing some to defect to Abdel Aziz. Perhaps sensing Arabia's shifting balance

of power, London had been distancing itself from the Hashemites since the end of World War I—especially after Sharif Hussein began constantly complaining about Britain’s evident betrayal.

Ikhwan leaders objected to the constraints Abdel Aziz placed on their behavior during the sacking of the Hejaz in 1924. During the fighting the Ikhwan disregarded Abdel Aziz’s cautionary warnings and rampaged through Mecca and Medina, smashing shrines that they considered sacrilegious and once again terrorizing Muslim pilgrims whose traditions differed from their own. Many of the king’s closest allies, including Abdullah bin Jiluwi and members of his family, pressed the king to crack down on the marauding religious fighters. But the king replied that “the Ikhwan were his children and that it was his duty to bear with them and advise, not punish them. Their intentions were good, he insisted, and sooner or later they would mend their ways.”<sup>54</sup>

The king tried to placate the Ikhwan by turning their attention elsewhere. But the Ikhwan grew frustrated, especially after Abdel Aziz failed to include any of their leaders in the new Hejaz government and did not appoint any of them governor in newly occupied towns. Worse still, the king made his own son Faisal viceroy of the area.<sup>55</sup> Abdel Aziz’s blatant nepotism offended the Ikhwan, especially when it involved such a religiously coveted position. Matters came to a head when the Ikhwan appeared determined to confront the British in Iraq, a move that Abdel Aziz deemed reckless. He rallied loyal Nejdī leaders who were exasperated by Ikhwan extremism, various frontier tribesmen, a few Bedouin tribal members who chose to fight against their kinsmen, and the ulema (serious religious scholars who acted as the guardians of legal and scholarly traditions); the last of these issued a fatwa (religious edict) recognizing the king’s right to set foreign policy. In the spring of 1929, at the fateful battle of Sibila, the king took the offensive to counter growing Ikhwan power. After an hour of brutal hand-to-hand combat, with Abdel Aziz leading the charge, his brother Mohammed to his left and his eldest son (the future King Saud) on his right, the battle was decided in Abdel Aziz’s favor.<sup>56</sup> The Ikhwan’s influence was all but destroyed with this loss. The Ikhwan leaders surrendered within months, an outcome that was hastened by British military support. The government proceeded to destroy many hijrah, although for decades afterward those not destroyed received government grants and subsidies. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the leaders of a 1979 revolt in Mecca that would shake the Saudi regime to its core was born in one of these remaining settlements.<sup>57</sup> Abdel Aziz followed the battle of Sibila with a set of regulations forbidding anyone but the ulema from issuing religious rulings. For the short term, he was able to dampen religious

extremism. But once created, the force could not be stamped out completely. Over the course of the following decades Saudi Arabian leaders engaged in trying to steer, subdue, and at times encourage the religious radicalism stoked in these early days.

The 1929 battle provides an early and powerful example of the tension between Saudi Arabia's political and religious establishment despite nearly two centuries of mutual dependence. Such tension courses through Saudi Arabia's political veins up to the present.<sup>58</sup> The religious extremism that the settlements produced puts pressure not only on the royal family but also on the more establishment-leaning clerics within the ulema. A point that most casual observers of Saudi Arabia often overlook is that the ulema has frequently played an important role in mediating between the fanatics and the government; it is not synonymous with either. The government has often been supported by important tribes and townsmen who believe that the al-Saud's courtship of religiously radical groups is not only dangerous but counterproductive, as their intolerance inflames outside powers against the kingdom.<sup>59</sup>

### **Enter America**

On September 23, 1932, Abdel Aziz formally declared his massive territorial acquisition to be the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The United States recognized it in 1933, the same year Socal won the Saudi oil concession.

As the king welcomed American oil workers to his lands, relations with Britain, now the dominant force in the region, grew testy. The British provided Abdel Aziz with an important stream of income, and they resented his courtship of the Americans.<sup>60</sup> But what Abdel Aziz found attractive about the newly arriving Americans was that they were not colonialists, like the British, and therefore were uninterested in restructuring Saudi domestic politics. They were first and foremost businessmen who represented their companies, not government policy. Happily, they also lived very far away. America's lack of interest in Saudi Arabia's domestic institutions became even more important in the 1950s, when anticolonial movements swept the region. Part of America's attractiveness throughout the Middle East was that it was not bent on occupation. It was not Great Britain. Ironically, this legacy is now used against the United States by critics pointing out that American allies are often brutally authoritarian, a characteristic that is an outgrowth of previous U.S. policies of noninterference.

The United States, already active in Saudi Arabia's oil fields, provided a natural counter to British hegemony in the region. British influence surrounded the kingdom. The British had treaty obligations with every Persian Gulf state, maintained a colony at Aden with protectorates around it (which eventually became South Yemen and then eventually merged with North Yemen), placed its allies on thrones in Iraq and Jordan, and held the Palestinian Mandate. A fear of encirclement, which guides Saudi Arabian foreign policy even today, pushed the new king away from the British and toward the Americans.

Later, just as the Americans helped to offset the British, Saudi leaders relied on Washington to offset Soviet power. The United States never had to convince Saudi Arabia that the Soviets were a threat, as they needed to do with Saudi Arabia's neighbors. True, Saudi leaders often viewed other threats as more compelling, such as the threat posed by Egypt, Yemen, and Israel (the first two eventually receiving considerable Soviet support). But the Saudi leadership took seriously Soviet machinations and held an anti-Communist outlook that was much more similar to the Americans' than it was to the points of view of many of their counterparts in the developing world.

In addition to America's anticolonial and later anti-Communist ideology, the United States also offered security and eventually access to markets. King Abdel Aziz worried about the British. His successors worried about Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran. From the beginning, America offered a military alternative. In the very first set of military agreements, the Dhahran airfield agreement, the United States offered Saudi Arabia a mission to begin training a military force. By 1950 President Truman had publicly committed the United States to the preservation of the independence and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. America remained the primary source of Saudi Arabian weapons until the 1980s.

If overlapping threat perceptions and the need for security pushed Saudi Arabia toward the United States, differences over Israel pulled them apart. These differences were never significant enough to lead Saudi Arabia into the Soviet camp, but Israel would remain a pressing issue for all Saudi Arabian leaders. As early as the 1930s, King Abdel Aziz vocally opposed increased Jewish immigration to Palestine. The king, like other Arab leaders, was against the partition of Palestine when it occurred. America's support for Israel gave a stick to Saudi Arabia's enemies to wield against the kingdom. Over the course of the last half century, Saudi Arabia's neighbors have relentlessly pointed out that the kingdom has the same international benefactor as the Arab archnemesis, Israel. America's support for Israel has also stoked anti-

Americanism among Saudi citizens, a phenomenon that the Soviets tried for years to exploit. As early as the 1940s the king warned that anti-Americanism would be the natural outcome of America's recognition. America's competing interests provided an ongoing difficulty for Saudi Arabia, from the 1940s until today. They have yet to find a way to reconcile them effectively. In 2001 Crown Prince (now King) Abdullah threatened to abrogate the long-standing relationship between the two countries unless Washington devised a way to reduce the violence between Palestinians and Israelis.

### **Setting the Stage for the Next Fifty Years**

From 1902 until 1933 Arabia emerged from a disparate group of tribes backed by various world powers to a unified state under the command of King Abdel Aziz. From 1933 until 1948 the king struggled to keep hold of his kingdom as financial hardship threatened to bankrupt his rule. Unlike their British counterparts, American oil companies appeared willing to risk desert hardships to search and dig for oil and possibly make the king some money. Their energy, business acumen, and notable lack of interest in reconfiguring Saudi domestic politics drew the king toward them.

The U.S.-Saudi political relationship was born at the end of World War II and grew up during the Cold War. The Cold War environment informed everything about the relationship, from why oil was important to whom it was to be kept from, whom it was to be directed toward, and how its profits were to be employed. But Saudi Arabia became a particularly valuable U.S. Cold War partner not only because of its oil but also for its strategic location and religiously inspired antipathy toward Communism. Unlike Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, it never seriously flirted with the Soviet Union or credibly played the United States off the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia's anti-Communist activity was particularly helpful during the 1970s when the United States was licking its wounds from the fighting in Vietnam. Confronted by an inward-focused America, Saudi Arabia, France, and others built a coalition to challenge Soviet adventurism, independent of American efforts. This was both welcomed and encouraged by the White House when it rejoined the fight after President Reagan took office in 1981.

But this was for the future. In 1945 the king was delighted to receive an invitation to meet the great American leader Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It was an opportunity that he would not pass up. The meeting would set the tone for the next fifty years of U.S.-Saudi relations.