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The National Interest and the Roots of American-Saudi Diplomacy

by

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Introduction

The question of how the United States went from dismissing Saudi Arabia as an unimportant backwater to having the kingdom as one of its most important Middle Eastern allies and trading partners is a counterintuitive puzzle, one that has long intrigued foreign policy journalists and think tank politicians. These contemporary foreign policy experts typically present American diplomacy with Saudi Arabia as the pursuit of national interest in accordance with a realist interpretation of international relations.¹ The United States needed oil during and after World War II and Saudi Arabia had lots of oil. Since both countries were united in opposition to Fascism during the war, and then later to Communism, the differences in their religion and government mattered less than these shared interests. Some of them mention the role Standard Oil of California (Socal) and the Texas Company (Texaco) played in developing the Saudi oil industry, or the diplomatic exchanges between the United States and the United Kingdom regarding Saudi Arabia. However, most contemporary journalists and think tank fellows ignore how the oil companies themselves impacted government policy when discussing the roots of American-Saudi diplomacy.

Historical scholarship on American-Saudi diplomacy is generally more sophisticated, and there are several authors who have analyzed the oil companies' operations in Saudi Arabia and the decisions made by diplomatic and military bureaucrats in the broader context of American diplomacy with the Allied Powers diplomacy during World War II.² Even so, much of this scholarship is not without its shortcomings. Some authors, especially those previously employed

¹ For a discussion of realism in international relations theory as well as the standard criticisms of the concept, see Raymond Hinesbusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2014).

² See Michael Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security: The Search for a National Policy on Foreign Oil, 1941-1947* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), Aaron Miller, *Search for Security: Saudi Arabian Oil and American Foreign Policy, 1939-1949* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991), Irvine Anderson, *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia: A Study of the Dynamics of Foreign Oil Policy, 1933-1950* (Princeton University Press, 2016), and Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (Saqi Books, 1998).

as United States government officials, offer detailed accounts of the American government's involvement in (and strategic concern for) Saudi oil, but make the aforementioned mistake of treating the American oil industry as a tangential player, one that needed the government's encouragement to expand operations in the kingdom.³ Other scholars do not pay sufficient attention to the effect World War II had on American-Saudi diplomacy, treating it as a footnote while instead discussing either the interwar years or the early Cold War period.⁴ Finally, while some authors correctly review the effects of World War II on American-Saudi diplomacy, their scope is too broad to adequately explain the mechanisms by which the diplomatic relationship between the two countries grew and developed.⁵

This paper is an analysis of the roots, causes, growth, and development of American-Saudi diplomacy from the end of World War I to the beginning of 1946, when the Americans and Saudis signed an airfield lease agreement at Dhahran. Building on historical scholarship, this analysis will primarily use the American government's internal memos and correspondences about Saudi Arabia from this time period to explore how the United States crafted its foreign policy with respect to the kingdom, how and why this foreign policy changed over time, and the role various government and private actors played in shaping it. In doing so, it will deconstruct the concept of national interest in American-Saudi diplomacy, and present a clearer picture of America's national

³ See Parker Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States: Birth of a Security Partnership* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), Wilbur Crane Eveland, *Ropes of Sand: America's Failure in the Middle East* (London: W. W. Norton, 1980), and Edward Chester, *United States Oil Policy and Diplomacy: A Twentieth-Century Overview* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).

⁴ See John DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East: 1900-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford University Press, 2007), David Lesch, *The Middle East and the United States: A Historical and Political Reassessment*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

⁵ See Albert Habib Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), and Anthony Cave Brown *Oil, God, and Gold: The Story of Aramco and the Saudi Kings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

interest, how it was decided upon, and who decided upon it. What will become apparent is that states are not uniform, cohesive actors, but a collection of different bureaucratic departments and different branches of government that are further influenced by external actors. In the case of American foreign policy in Saudi Arabia, Socal and Texaco corresponded with officials in the Departments of State and Interior, and those officials determined America's strategic interests and made foreign policy after discussions with US military leaders and British diplomats.

The American oil industry began petitioning the government to protect their interests in the Middle East almost immediately after World War I. With respect to Saudi Arabia, oil company personnel and the Socal concession were foundational for US-Saudi diplomacy, not only because the American government sought to protect the concession, but because it relied to a large degree on the companies' executives and representatives for information about the situation in the kingdom. Before World War II, the State Department generally did not interact directly with the government of Saudi Arabia, which left plenty of room for oilmen to shape foreign policy. Oil companies regularly invoked the possibility of other countries gaining leveraging influence in Saudi Arabia when attempting to make State Department policy more to their liking. During World War II, the broad outline of American-Saudi diplomacy was influenced by a number of additional factors. It continued to be influenced by Socal and Texaco, who looked to protect their concession. But in the final years of the war, it was also shaped by American strategic designs in response to both the specific needs of the war effort and the world that military and diplomatic personnel expected would exist after the war. During World War II, Saudi Arabia served as a vital conduit to transfer supplies and personnel between the European and Pacific theater. After the war, American strategic planners decided Saudi oil would serve as an anchor for both American military security at home and stability in the Eastern Hemisphere.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part covers the geopolitics of the Middle East and the United Kingdom's hegemony in the region from World War I to 1928. The second part examines why the American oil industry took an interest in the Middle East after World War I and how oil companies secured their rights in the region by influencing the United States government and the press. It also looks at how Socal (and eventually Texaco) set up operations in Saudi Arabia. The third part looks at American diplomacy with Ibn Saud's kingdom from 1928 to 1942, and the vital role Socal played in facilitating and encouraging a closer relationship between the two countries in the context of rapidly escalating world tension. The fourth part examines how and why American foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia shifted in 1943, becoming much more involved because of American plans for the kingdom's oil and military potential, and the continuities of American foreign policy in the months after the war ended.

I

It is necessary to examine how Britain established political hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf in order to understand the geopolitical situation beginning in the late 1920s when American oil companies and the State Department became interested in the region. As early as the late eighteenth century, Great Britain had sought to secure the Suez route to India and the East Indies for the purpose of trade, transport, and communications. The only alternatives were to either sail around the Cape of Good Hope or sail through the Persian Gulf and then travel overland through Mesopotamia and then Constantinople. By comparison, the Suez route was not only faster, it was easier for Great Britain to monopolize.⁶

Maintaining British imperial integrity was therefore dependent on two strategies. First, Britain sought to prevent any other great power from using or exerting pressure on the Suez route,

⁶ John Marlowe, *Perfidious Albion: The Origins of Anglo-French Rivalry in the Levant* (London, 1971), 23.

be it France during the Coalition Wars, Russia for most of the nineteenth century, or Germany and then Italy for the first half of the twentieth century.⁷ This meant preventing the other great powers from gaining access to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, both of which lay along the flank of the route to India. Second, Britain sought to secure any ports from which hostile navies might menace British shipping. To that end, the United Kingdom signed protectorate agreements with Oman, Bahrain and Qatar, and the Trucial States in the early nineteenth century. These agreements compelled the signatories to refer all diplomatic disputes to the British Foreign Office and not enter into agreements with non-Arabian powers without British consent.⁸ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britain added Egypt, Kuwait, and Cyprus to this sphere of influence, while largely ignoring the impenetrable interior of the Arabian Peninsula, so long as her protectorates on the coasts were not threatened.

The discovery of oil in Mesopotamia and Iran in the first decade of the twentieth century would eventually provide Britain with a third major strategic interest in the Middle East. Still, for at least the early years of World War I, British foreign policy in the Middle East was focused on finding regional support for the Allied campaign against the Ottomans. Besides signing secret agreements with the French and the Russians promising each of them a sphere of influence in the soon-to-be-dismembered Ottoman Empire, the United Kingdom also initiated diplomacy with two rival leaders in Arabia—Hussein bin Ali Al-Hashimi, the Sharif of Mecca and Emir of Hejaz, and Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud, the Emir of Nejd—in order to support its position in the peninsula (and, by extension, Mesopotamia).⁹ The British persuaded Sharif Hussein and Ibn Saud to agree to a

⁷ For discussions of the “Eastern Question” and British rivalries with France and Russia in the Middle East see Marlowe, *Perfidious Albion*, 50-52, 142-48, and 230-35, and Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 279-81.

⁸ Gary Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia: Britain and the Rise of the House of Saud* (London: Routledge, 2015), 24-26, and Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 225.

⁹ Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia*, 210-15, and Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 317.

temporary truce and to attack the Ottomans and their allies. In the case of the Hejaz, the British Foreign Office extended a subsidy to Hussein and seemingly encouraged his Arab nationalist ambitions, going so far as to promise rule over an Arab state in Syria to Hussein's son Faisal, despite also agreeing to award Syria to the French.¹⁰

The British concluded a treaty with Ibn Saud at Darin in 1915 that was in many respects similar to the protectorate treaties signed with the coastal Sheikdoms in the nineteenth century. Ibn Saud promised not to intervene in the affairs of the Sheikdoms, nor to correspond with, entreat with, or grant concessions to any other great power without first consulting the British government. In return, he received diplomatic recognition and promise of non-interference in Nejd's internal affairs, a guarantee in the event of unprovoked attack, and shipments of arms and an annual subsidy of £5,000.¹¹ The Saudis were concerned with maintaining their independence and with preventing an attack by the Hashemites, a fact known to the Foreign Office.¹² Ibn Saud was also aware of how British power encircled his Emirate in Arabia, and though it took him time to sever communications with the Turks, he launched an attack against another of his longtime rivals, the Ottoman-supported Rashidi Emirate of Hail.¹³

Though the Middle East was never a major theater in World War I, British geologists believed it held significant oil reserves, which made the region extremely important during peace negotiations. With its introduction of tanks, planes, and trucks to the battlefield, the First World War very quickly demonstrated the necessity of oil not just to the United Kingdom's military

¹⁰ Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 18-19, and Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 360. For what is probably the most commonly cited account of the Arab Revolt including British promises to, and military support for, the Hejaz, see Thomas Edward Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922).

¹¹ Brown *Oil, God, and Gold*, 2, Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 198-200, and Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia*, 122.

¹² Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia*, 145, 228.

¹³ Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 204-207, and Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 280.

planners but to all of the world's great powers. A few weeks after the war ended, Lord Curzon (then in the British War Cabinet) told the Inter-Allied Petroleum Conference that "the Allied cause had been "floated to victory on a wave of oil," because if it had not been for the great fleets of motor trucks the war could not have been won."¹⁴ Even more worryingly for Britain, German interdiction of oil tankers towards the end of 1916 had created such a shortage of oil that the Royal Navy was compelled to halt some of its naval operations. The British Empire could not survive without the Royal Navy, and the Royal Navy, which switched its main fuel from coal to petroleum under the supervision of Winston Churchill, was fast becoming dependent on a reliable oil supply.¹⁵ Though most of the oil Lord Curzon referred to was shipped from the United States, British strategists decided the maintenance of the empire, which already depended on Middle Eastern communication lines and shipping routes, would also require securing Middle Eastern reserves.¹⁶ Taking the shortage caused by German interdiction to heart, a geology expedition was dispatched to Mesopotamia in 1917 with the primary objective of securing oil refineries and pipelines for Anglo-Persian Oil Company.¹⁷

The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres imposed a new Anglo-French imperial order on the Arab Middle East, although Turkey managed to preserve her sovereignty (albeit within reduced borders) by negotiating the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. Sèvres assigned the territories of Iraq and Palestine as mandates to Britain and Syria and Lebanon to France.¹⁸ This did not endear either France or the

¹⁴ "Floated to Victory on a Wave of Oil': Earl Curzon Tells How Allied Ingenuity Overcame Petroleum Crisis of 1916," *The New York Times*. November 23, 1918.

¹⁵ Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold* 4. For more information on the oil shortages suffered by various participants during World War I see John DeNovo, "The Movement for an Aggressive American Oil Policy Abroad, 1918-1920," *American Historical Review*, 61 (July 1956): 855-56.

¹⁶ Miller, *Search for Security*, 22-23 and 27-28. Miller estimates that on the eve of World War I the United States accounted for 65% of global oil production while the Middle East accounted for 1%.

¹⁷ Chester, *United States Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 222.

¹⁸ As Russia had been knocked out of the war and was no longer capable of incorporating the straits into its sphere of influence, the British hoped the United States could be persuaded to dispatch troops to the Middle East or to take mandates in Anatolia. The British government seems to have hoped having its ally in the region would serve

United Kingdom to the people of the Middle East. The United States, on the other hand, was generally held in high regard. The American presence in the Middle East up to that point was mostly a collection of missionaries and educators, and the citizens of the British and French mandates took Woodrow Wilson's apparent commitment to self-determination seriously, even if it ultimately failed to materialize.¹⁹ Although the Wilson administration was aware of the Allied Powers' plans to partition the Ottoman Empire when the United States joined the war in 1917 (and the twelfth item in the Fourteen Points stated that the US would not accept such an arrangement), America never signed the Treaty of Sèvres and Wilson's objections were ultimately of no consequence.²⁰

With the other imperial powers of Europe having collapsed, the positions of the British and French Empires looked at first glance unchallengeable. The United Kingdom had absolute naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, along with unchallenged influence in the Arabian Peninsula. Britain was now even able to secure the Mesopotamian overland route between the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, both countries moved to monopolize investments in the resources of their newly-established mandates (and, in Britain's case, protectorates established before the war), most notably in oil.²¹ The culmination of Anglo-French negotiations over how to divide the oil reserves of Ottoman territory was the San Remo Agreement of 1920. This secret agreement secured France its share of Middle Eastern oil by awarding it Germany's 23.75 percent interest in the Turkish

as a bulwark against the spread of Bolshevism while allowing it to conserve its war-sapped manpower and resources. Wilson, however, refused, citing the difficulty of persuading the American public and the Senate to consent. For more detail see DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East*, 114-118 and Uriel Dann, *The Great Powers in the Middle East: 1919-1939* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 242.

¹⁹ Dann, *The Great Powers in the Middle East*, 225, DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East*, 112-13 and 321, and Lesch, *The Middle East and the United States*, 13.

²⁰ DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East*, 110.

²¹ Dann, *The Great Powers in the Middle East*, 3 and Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 320.

Petroleum Company, a joint venture operating in Mosul oil fields. In return, France consented to the British building a pipeline to the Mediterranean that crossed French mandates.²²

Following World War I, the former Ottoman territories experienced a wave of Arab nationalism that resulted in anti-imperialist uprisings in Iraq and Syria. Though the British had encouraged Arab nationalism during the war, Britain's failure to uphold her promise of independence and Wilson's rhetoric about self-determination strengthened nationalistic fervor in the mandates after Sèvres.²³ Outside of the mandates, Ibn Saud began waging war once again on his old Hashemite rivals, and by 1925 he successfully deposed Sharif Hussein and thereafter ruled both Nejd and Hejaz. Despite having made a bid for Arab unification himself, Sharif Hussein had suffered a blow to his prestige in the Middle East. He was widely blamed for contributing to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the resulting subjugation by European empires, and his claiming of the title of Caliph shortly after its abolition was not taken seriously.²⁴ More importantly, however, the British cut Sharif Hussein loose, acquiescing to Ibn Saud's conquests and drawing hard borders in 1925 between Ibn Saud's territory and Transjordan and Iraq.²⁵

In 1927, the United Kingdom and Ibn Saud revised their 1915 agreement with the Treaty of Jiddah, in which the British recognized Ibn Saud as the independent monarch of both provinces and Ibn Saud reaffirmed his commitment to respect the British coastal protectorates.²⁶ The treaty was motivated in part by Britain's desire to maintain good relations with the custodian of Mecca and Medina, since the Foreign Office decided that this was vital to keeping the large number of

²² Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold*, 9-10, Chester, *US Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 222, and DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East*, 176-77.

²³ Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 18-21, Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 316, and Lesch, *The Middle East and the United States*, 25.

²⁴ Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 225-26.

²⁵ Dann, *The Great Powers in the Middle East*, 30-31.

²⁶ Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 227.

Muslims living in India content.²⁷ However, the degree to which the Jiddah Treaty truly affirmed the independence of Hejaz and Nejd versus merely restructuring the old protectorate relationship is up for debate. With his conquest of Hejaz in 1925, Ibn Saud had probably extended his domain about as far as he possibly could. Hejaz and Nejd remained encircled by British satellites and mandates on all sides, and Treaty of Jiddah did little to alter the reality that the dual monarchy was still dependent on the UK for military defense.²⁸

II

In the 1930s, two American companies—Standard Oil of California (Socal) and the Texas Company (Texaco)—built an oil industry in Saudi Arabia from scratch, and in a matter of years the kingdom went from producing no oil to becoming the world's largest oil producer. But the story of how the American oil industry found itself in Saudi Arabia begins much earlier, when oil companies took an interest in the Middle East at the end of World War I. The British decision to exclude foreigners from operating in the mandates caused a diplomatic dispute with the United States—not because it antagonized the United States government *per se*, but because it antagonized United States oil companies who were diligent in lobbying the government to protect American access to the mandates. This began even before the San Remo Agreement was signed with the creation of the American Petroleum Institute (API) on March 14, 1919, which lobbied the US government to push for the rights of American oil companies to operate abroad.²⁹ The same month, the Standard Oil Company of New York (Socony), which had acquired prospecting rights near Jerusalem shortly before war broke out, complained to the State Department about the British

²⁷ Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 58.

²⁸ For debate on the degree to which the Hejaz and Nejd remained a British protectorate in 1927 see Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 231, Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 319, and Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 4-5.

²⁹ Chester, *US Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 11.

army in Palestine seizing and copying their maps and drilling plans.³⁰ Later that year, Socony notified the State Department that the British army was preventing their representative from operating in Mesopotamia, despite permitting a Shell Group geologist to work uninterrupted.³¹ Socony also informed the State Department that Britain refused to recognize any concessions that had not been worked before the war.³²

The American oil industry, so vital to the Allied victory in World War I, was looking to the future of petroleum production with increasing alarm. Civilian demand in the United States was already high and was only projected to go up, and it was doubtful whether American oil extraction alone would be sufficient to meet it. The *New York Journal of Commerce* estimated that per capita consumption of oil was 220 gallons in the United States compared to 14 gallons in the rest of the world, and over ninety percent of motorcars on the roads were American.³³ Worryingly, British oil companies (chief among them Royal-Dutch Shell, a joint Anglo-Dutch enterprise, and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company) had managed to acquire rights to over half of the world's proven reserves.³⁴ Moreover, the governments of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were extremely protective of their overseas possessions, and had no intention of allowing American companies to prospect in them. The American oil industry believed these restrictions were unfair, since the United States government imposed no such restrictions on foreign companies operating in American territory.³⁵ The San Remo Agreement, which effectively froze Americans out of the

³⁰ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1919*, Volume II, eds. Joseph V. Fuller and Tyler Dennett (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1934), Document 198,

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919v02/d198>.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Document 203, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919v02/d203>, and Document 210,

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919v02/d210>.

³² *Ibid.*, Document 204, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919v02/d204>.

³³ "Oil Troubling the Diplomatic Waters," *The Literary Digest*, December 11, 1920.

³⁴ DeNovo, "The Movement for an Aggressive American Oil Policy Abroad, 1918-1920", 864-65, Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 3, and Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 263.

³⁵ Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 4-5 and Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 263.

Middle East entirely by denying them the chance to buy into the Turkish Petroleum Company, was the final straw. The newly-created American Petroleum Institute, along with the older American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers, lobbied the executive branch and Congress. The two industry groups warned an oil shortage was on the horizon. They also pointed to the crucial role oil played during the war, and encouraged the government to demand equal treatment for American companies abroad via diplomatic channels.³⁶

The oil companies got results. The State Department was sufficiently concerned with whether American oil companies would be able to operate in Mesopotamia and Palestine that it inquired to the US peace delegation about whether Britain planned to reserve the mandates' oil reserves for itself.³⁷ Adapting America's China policy from the turn of the century, the United States government committed to demanding an "Open Door" in the mandates.³⁸ Wilson signed the Mineral Leasing Act into law in 1920, which empowered the government to bar leasing on public lands to any foreign nationals from countries that did not reciprocate such open access to Americans business.³⁹ The State Department also lodged a complaint with the British Foreign Office on the matter. When Lord Curzon pointed out that the United Kingdom accounted for a measly 4.5% of global oil production and protested American hypocrisy in demanding an Open Door policy while interfering with British attempts to secure concessions in Haiti and Costa Rica, Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby accused Britain of making promises in the San Remo agreement which violated the principle of the mandate system and questioned whether the Turkish

³⁶ DeNovo, "The Movement for an Aggressive American Oil Policy Abroad, 1918-1920," 867-68.

³⁷ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1919*, Volume II, Document 200, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919v02/d200>, and Document 203, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919v02/d203>.

³⁸ Anderson, *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia*, 15-16.

³⁹ Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 4-5.

Petroleum Company possessed rights to any concession prior to the war.⁴⁰ Even more striking is how quickly the prospective oil shortage became accepted as self-evident fact. The State Department, which had barely (if at all) been concerned about a global shortage through the course of the war, cited “the shortage of petroleum, its constantly increasing commercial importance, and the continuing necessity of replenishing the world’s supply by drawing upon the latent resources of undeveloped regions” as a justification for why the principle of equal treatment must be upheld in the mandates.⁴¹

The strategic importance of oil was something nearly everyone working in both the government and in the press understood, and the oil industry faced little political opposition. American oil companies enjoyed bipartisan support in Washington, and the State Department’s stance on the principle of equal treatment in the Mesopotamian mandate did not change with Warren Harding’s election and the appointment of Charles Evan Hughes as Colby’s successor as Secretary of State. Additionally, major newspapers were largely unanimous in support of the American oil industry’s point of view. A *Literary Digest* review of newspaper articles from December 1920 showcased a number of different arguments in favor of American oil companies’ rights in the Middle East. Newspapers argued that “what the United States is asking on the subject of Mesopotamia is what we have always been willing to grant to the whole world,” and whether the United States joined the League of Nations or not, America was “bound to see to it that other nations do not monopolize the exploitation of territory we helped to free from the Central

⁴⁰ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1920, Volume II*, eds. Joseph V. Fuller and Tyler Dennett (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1936), Document 551, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1920v02/d551>, and Document 553, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1920v02/d553>.

⁴¹ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1920, Volume II*, Document 553, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1920v02/d553>.

Powers.”⁴² When the United States dispatched observers to the Lausanne negotiations, most newspapers approved of Secretary of State Hughes’ diligence in protecting American oil interests, with only a few questioning whether the State Department was really just protecting corporate profits.⁴³

The resolution of this Anglo-American dispute over the mandates came in 1928 with the signing of the Red Line Agreement, which allowed Standard Oil of New York, Standard Oil of New Jersey, Gulf Oil, Atlantic Refining, and the Pan-American Petroleum and Transport Company to buy into the Turkish Petroleum Company. The Agreement also prohibited all stakeholders in the venture from operating anywhere in the former Ottoman Empire except Kuwait. The Red Line Agreement represented a broader shift in American oil diplomacy away from the interventionism of the early interwar years, which occurred because of changes in the supply and demand of oil. The discovery of additional reserves in the American Southwest in 1924 and the resulting increase in domestic petroleum production helped assuage oilmen’s fears of insufficient supply.⁴⁴ Thereafter, the impending oil shortage, which had once been conventional wisdom, received less and less newspaper coverage as it receded into memory. With the steep reduction in domestic demand brought about by the Great Depression, the specter of an oil shortage evaporated, and the government no longer felt the kind of pressure to pursue an aggressive oil policy abroad that it had confronted just after World War I.⁴⁵ The result was that by 1929, the State Department conducted only brief (and far less contentious) correspondence with its British chargé on the issue of American oil operations in Bahrain. There are no State Department records of Socal asking the Department to provide assistance in the negotiation of its concession in Saudi Arabia, despite the

⁴² “Oil Troubling the Diplomatic Waters,” *The Literary Digest*, December 11, 1920.

⁴³ “Uncle Sam Mixing in the Turkish Broil,” *The Literary Digest*, December 23, 1922.

⁴⁴ Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 6-7 and Miller, *Search for Security*, 31.

⁴⁵ Dann, *The Great Powers in the Middle East*, 231-33.

Turkish Petroleum Company (now rechristened as the Iraq Petroleum Company) also being in negotiations with the Saudis for drilling rights.

Gulf Oil had acquired rights to a concession in Bahrain in 1927 from the Eastern and General Syndicate, a British speculator.⁴⁶ However, because the Red Line Agreement barred any Turkish Petroleum Company stakeholder from operating independently in an area that included Bahrain, the company sold its rights in 1928 to the Standard Oil Company of California (Socal) for \$50,000. Socal was a relative newcomer among American oil companies to international exploration. Although the oil shortage panic had abated by 1928, the company still poured millions into prospecting abroad, and eventually decided to focus its attention on the Persian Gulf region as a hedge against any future supply shortages.⁴⁷ This brought the company into conflict with Anglo-Persian and the other British companies that operated in the Middle East. Though the British had mostly ignored the Arabian Peninsula, as its geology was different from the oil-producing geology of Iran and Iraq, they nonetheless did not want regional competition.⁴⁸

Complaining to the British Colonial Office, the British companies successfully held up renewal of the concession shortly after Socal purchased it. The Colonial Office demanded the insertion of provisions in the concession requiring that the company operating it be British-registered and that its managing director plus a majority of board members be British subjects.⁴⁹ Socal's response to British demands was to set up and assign the concession to a subsidiary registered in the Dominion of Canada, the Bahrain Petroleum Company. As Socony and Standard

⁴⁶ Arabian American Oil Company, *Aramco Handbook: Oil and the Middle East* (Dhahran, 1968), 107.

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia*, 21-22.

⁴⁸ *Aramco Handbook*, 108, and Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 264.

⁴⁹ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1929*, Volume III, eds. Joseph V. Fuller and Tyler Dennett (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1944), Document 60, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1929v03/d60>.

Oil New Jersey had done several years earlier, Socal took its case to the State Department.⁵⁰ However, in contrast to the years-long dispute over the Mesopotamian oil fields, the Bahrain issue was resolved in short order. The British government assented to the Bahrain Petroleum Company operating the concession in 1929.⁵¹

Socal first considered extending its operations to the Arabian mainland in 1930, when it asked the Saudis about whether they might grant the company rights to free exploration.⁵² The company became increasingly interested in the Arabian mainland in 1932, after successfully striking oil in Bahrain and after a meeting between businessman and former ambassador Charles Crane and Ibn Saud arranged by Ibn Saud's British expat advisor St. John Philby.⁵³ Socal executives had corresponded with Philby for some time, and Philby's notes about the geology of the Arabian interior were the company's first clue as to Saudi Arabia's oil potential.⁵⁴ Crane contacted Karl Twitchell, a mining engineer who in the 1920s had occasionally conducted survey work in Arabia at the behest of the American government, and asked him to lead a prospecting expedition for oil in the province of al-Hasa.⁵⁵ Twitchell's surveying indicated oil was indeed buried there, and he notified Socal Vice President Francis Loomis, who had previously worked as a diplomat for the State Department. Loomis wrote to Philby to tell him Socal desired to drill for oil and requested Philby keep him in the loop regarding what would be needed to secure Ibn Saud's approval.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1929, Volume III, Document 61, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1929v03/d61>.*

⁵² Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia*, 300.

⁵³ Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold*, 22-23, and Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 262-63.

⁵⁴ R. W. Powers, L. F. Ramirez, C. D. Redmond, and E. L. Elberg, Jr., "Geology of the Arabian Peninsula: Sedimentary Geology of Saudi Arabia," U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper 560-D (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1966).

⁵⁵ Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold*, 22-23, and Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 262-63.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold*, 22-23.

Representatives from the Iraq Petroleum Company also expressed their interest in negotiating a Saudi concession. Philby replied that the Saudis were aiming for a payment of one hundred thousand pounds in gold, which the Iraq Petroleum Company representatives scoffed at as outrageous.⁵⁷ The Saudi government lowered its asking price to fifty thousand pounds, and Socal counteroffered with thirty-five thousand pounds up front. On May 29, 1933, the terms of the concession were finalized. Socal received drilling rights to an exclusive area of 360,000 square miles in eastern Saudi Arabia, and agreed to provide a loan of thirty thousand pounds in gold, to be repaid via deductions from future royalties, as well as an annual royalty of five thousand pounds in gold.⁵⁸ Further stipulations provided for the construction of a refinery “as soon as practicable after the date of discovery of oil in commercial quantities,” the provision of all topographic maps and operations report to the Saudi government, and a guarantee that Socal would not interfere with the kingdom’s administrative, political, or religious affairs.⁵⁹

There is a strong consensus in the scholarship on the Socal concession that Ibn Saud was motivated almost entirely by money.⁶⁰ The kingdom’s primary source of revenue was the taxes collected from pilgrims to the holy cities, but the Great Depression severely reduced the number of people undertaking the Hajj from over one hundred thousand in 1930 to under twenty thousand by 1933.⁶¹ The result was a catastrophic financial shortfall. Ibn Saud was probably between £300,000 and £400,000 in debt by 1933.⁶² Philby would later remark that the concession “turned on the down payment” of gold that Socal promised, and which the Iraq Petroleum Company had

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 48-52.

⁵⁸ “Oil, 1963,” FO 371/168903, The Arabian Gulf Digital Archive.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ See Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold* 18-23, Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* 227, DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East* 360, Miller, *Search for Security* 37-38, and Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* 262.

⁶¹ Chester, *US Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 18-23.

⁶² Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 262.

balked at.⁶³ Another hypothesis is that Ibn Saud granted the concession to an American rather than a British company as a way of asserting his independence from the United Kingdom. While the British were providing a stipend to Ibn Saud, they had also propped up and financed his Hashemite rivals in Iraq and Transjordan, and there was no guarantee they would not back them at Saudi expense in a future conflict.⁶⁴ Most scholars reject this explanation, but what is undoubtedly true is that Ibn Saud regularly compared the United States favorably to the United Kingdom when conferring with American businessmen and diplomats. At one point, Ibn Saud told an American envoy that he had valued the American government's noninvolvement and Socal's lack of any ulterior political motive.⁶⁵ Ibn Saud was also fond of telling American visitors his reasons for dealing with Socal as opposed to one of its competitors. He would praise the Americans' ingenuity in oil exploration, compliment Americans for being "more interested in business than in acquiring political advantage," and note that the United States was "very far away!"⁶⁶

Most likely, the Saudi government was concerned first and foremost with securing its own rule, and that meant balancing a number of different aims. That the concession included a commitment from Socal not to interfere in Saudi internal affairs indicates that Saudi leadership considered the Kingdom's sovereignty important. On the other hand, the risk posed by internal dissent in 1933 far outweighed the risk of Britain meddling in Saudi affairs or supporting the kingdom's rivals. The Ikhwan (the main Saudi military force) had agitated against Ibn Saud's laxity on enforcing religious law for quite some time and, when the concession was negotiated, a high-ranking sheikh within the Ikhwan directly challenged Ibn Saud, labeling him insufficiently

⁶³ Miller, *Search for Security*, 40.

⁶⁴ Miller, *Search for Security*, 41 and Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States*, 13.

⁶⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV*, eds. E. Ralph Perkins, Ralph R. Goodwin, Laurence Evans, and Francis C. Prescott (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1964), Document 999, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d999>.

⁶⁶ Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States*, 38.

Islamic.⁶⁷ Though Ibn Saud supposedly managed to win the sheikh over with his charm and the judgement of a *qadi*, such a challenge represented the biggest threat to his rule. The king relied on support from the clan leaders, which he secured through a combination of development and direct provision of supplies and money, something that the budget shortfall threatened to interrupt.⁶⁸ And whatever skepticism Ibn Saud had towards the United Kingdom's motives, he continued collaborating with the British and they continued subsidizing the kingdom well into World War II. Indeed, the Saudi government's interest in securing financial aid would remain a constant in the country's diplomacy well past the end of the war. Assuming that Ibn Saud's praise of the Americans for their pursuit of profits over politics was not merely flattery, it was probably of secondary concern to the payments Socal offered.

For its part, there were several reasons why Socal would have been drawn to operate in Saudi Arabia. Socal had been excluded from the Red Line Agreement, but still sought the same access to cheap reserves that the signatories of the agreement were pursuing. Another agreement between the oil companies signed in 1928 at Achnacarry in Scotland meant producing and selling oil in the Eastern Hemisphere became extremely profitable.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia offered an additional advantage to any company looking to circumvent granting labor concessions: it did

⁶⁷ Vassiliev, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 243-53, and Hart, *Saudi Arabia and the United States*, 8-9.

⁶⁸ Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* 226, and *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers*, 1941, The British Commonwealth; The Near East and Africa, Volume III, eds. N. O. Sappington, Francis C. Prescott, and Kieran J. Carroll (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1959), Document 647, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d647>.

⁶⁹ Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 228. Eveland's explanation of Achnacarry is worth quoting in full: 'The "posted price," or "Gulf-plus" system, was agreed on by the oil-cartel members in 1928. It involves a "phantom freight" charge based on the sales (not cost) price of oil produced on the Texas Gulf Coast plus the freight rate between the Gulf Coast port and the Persian Gulf oil terminals. Thus, if oil sold for one dollar a barrel in Texas, and the freight rate from there to Bahrain was twenty-five cents a barrel, the oil produced in Bahrain and sold there would have a "posted price" of one dollar and twenty-five cents—even though it actually cost ten cents a barrel to produce and royalty payments to the Bahrain government amounted to an additional twenty cents. Moreover, the twenty cents the oil company paid in royalties could be used as a credit against the oil company's U.S. taxes for domestic or foreign operations.'

not have functioning unions, political parties, or a Parliament.⁷⁰ In contrast to Iran and Iraq (which produced the bulk of Middle Eastern oil when Socal began its negotiations), workers in Saudi Arabia had few avenues through which to voice demands for fairness or improvements in education, training, wages, or promotions.

Shortly after negotiations concluded, Socal set up the California-Arabian Standard Oil Company (Casoc) as a subsidiary to operate the concession. Socal only contacted the State Department after securing the concession, requesting help in obtaining authorization from British authorities for the company's flights in Egyptian, Iraqi, and Bahraini airspace.⁷¹ Drilling commenced in 1935 at the Dammam salt dome. In 1936, a deal was reached with the Texas Company (Texaco) for the purchase of a half-interest in the Casoc operations. The deal served both parties well. Socal received access to the market outlets where Texaco was well-established as well as integration into Texaco's global marketing organization, while Texaco secured a more accessible supply of crude oil.⁷² Oil was finally discovered on March 4, 1938 at Dammam well number seven, and Socal determined it was commercially viable by October of that year.⁷³ Casoc negotiated a supplemental agreement expanding the concession in 1939, receiving rights to an

⁷⁰ Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 20-25, 40-41, and 54-59. Vitalis also examines how the oil industry in the US pioneered workforce segregation and union busting as way to forestall giving concessions to labor and then exported them to its foreign operations across the globe. This included Socal, which paid American and Arabian workers different wages, kept them in separate quarters, and generally barred them from interacting or sharing spaces.

⁷¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers*, 1934, General, the British Commonwealth, Volume I, eds. Rogers P. Churchill, Matilda F. Axton, Shirley L. Landau, Newton O. Sappington, and Kieran J. Carroll (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951), Document 660, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v01/d660>, Document 663, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v01/d663>, and Document 664, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v01/d664>.

⁷² *Aramco Handbook*, 111-12, Chester, *US Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 233, and Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 36.

⁷³ Powers *et al.*, "Geology of the Arabian Peninsula."

additional 135,000 square miles in exchange for £140,000 in gold and a £20,000 royalty, with the promise of additional £100,000 upon discovery of oil in the additional territory.⁷⁴

By 1940 Casoc had surveyed up to 175,000 square miles and mapped in detail 50,000 square miles of the concession's territory, but Casoc's operations shut down almost entirely within a couple of years following the outbreak of World War II.⁷⁵ On October 18, 1940, Italian planes bombed Casoc property at Al Khobar, damaging water and oil pipelines.⁷⁶ Six months later, by May of 1941, Casoc evacuated their workers' families and the majority of their workforce.⁷⁷ The few employees who remained in the field continued producing between twelve and fifteen thousand barrels of oil per day, which were shipped to the refinery in Bahrain.⁷⁸ At the king's request, they also conducted surveys for water and agricultural potential and used company trucks to deliver food to the villages.⁷⁹ After the last German and Italian forces were pushed out of the Middle East and North Africa in May of 1943, the company gradually started resuming its operations. Casoc drilled a new well at al-Jauf in 1943, although the well proved unsuccessful. The company changed its name to the Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco) on January 31, 1944, and by the end of the year, Aramco had two surface-mapping parties working in the field.⁸⁰ By the time World War II ended, oil production returned to its pre-war level (as we will see, with significant assistance from the American government), and Aramco discovered three additional oil fields at Abu Hadriya, Abqaiq, and al-Qatif.⁸¹ Oil production grew exponentially in the years

⁷⁴ *Aramco Handbook*, 112.

⁷⁵ Powers *et al.*, "Geology of the Arabian Peninsula."

⁷⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers*, 1940, General and Europe, Volume II, eds. Matilda F. Axton and Shirley L. Phillips (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1957), Document 839, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v02/d839>, and Document 844, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v02/d844>.

⁷⁷ *Aramco Handbook*, 120.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Aramco Handbook*, 120-22.

⁸⁰ *Aramco Handbook*, 120-22, and Powers *et al.*, "Geology of the Arabian Peninsula."

⁸¹ Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 277.

after the war, and by 1950, Saudi Arabia was the world's leading producer of oil. Aramco launched a number of construction projects after the end of World War II, including the Trans-Arabian Oil Pipeline (also called Tapline), a refinery at Ras Tanura not too far from Dhahran, and a number of railways built at the behest of the Saudi royal family.⁸²

III

America's diplomatic contact with Saudi Arabia, which had hitherto been minimal, proceeded to grow significantly between 1928 and 1942. This process started slowly, but accelerated after Social's negotiation of the Saudi concession in 1933, and was thereafter aided and encouraged by the company's personnel. Diplomats from the Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd initiated contact with the United States as early as 1928, inquiring about the possibility of diplomatic recognition.⁸³ In 1930, the Saudi financial minister requested that the Hoover administration dispatch a geology expert to survey the country's mineral and water resource potential.⁸⁴ The expert the government sent was none other than Karl Twitchell, whose prospecting would pique Social's interest in Saudi oil. Secretary of State Henry Stimson approved the granting of diplomatic recognition to the Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd in 1931, after deciding there was no reason why it should not be extended.⁸⁵ The State Department insisted as preconditions that the Hejazi government provide for equal treatment and legal protections for American nationals per international law.⁸⁶ The two

⁸² Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 80-85.

⁸³ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1931, Volume II*, eds. Joseph V. Fuller and Tyler Dennett (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1946), Document 529, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1931v02/d529>.

⁸⁴ Chester, *US Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 232.

⁸⁵ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1931, Volume II*, Document 529, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1931v02/d529>, and Document 532, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1931v02/d532>. The State Department had initially intended to grant recognition to both the Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd and the Imamate of Yemen. However, Stimson decided against granting recognition to the latter because of the Imam's poor relations with his neighbors.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Document 531, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1931v02/d531>.

countries' diplomatic representatives drafted a treaty of friendship, commerce, and navigation, granting the United States most favored nation status and enumerating the rights of American diplomatic staff in Saudi Arabia, which was signed on November 7, 1933.⁸⁷

Even after extending diplomatic recognition, contact between the Saudi government and the State Department remained indirect, occurring almost entirely through either the British minister to Hejaz or the American Consulate in Iraq. Although the Department had established the Division of Near Eastern Affairs in 1909, it remained perpetually understaffed and overextended, and the State Department did not even have a diplomatic corps fluent in Arabic until after World War II.⁸⁸ The absence of any American diplomatic infrastructure in Saudi Arabia meant that the State Department relied on Americans on the ground for intelligence, the vast majority of whom were Socal executives and representatives. There is hardly any mention of Saudi Arabia in State Department archives prior to 1939, and a review of the handful of State Department memos discussing Saudi Arabia in between 1933 and 1938 demonstrates the degree to which Socal not only influenced, but also served as a conduit for diplomacy between the United States and the kingdom. As previously noted, in 1934 Socal asked for the State Department's help in securing authorization from British authorities for the company's flights in Egyptian, Iraqi, and Bahraini airspace.⁸⁹ In 1937, a year after a revolt broke out in the Palestinian mandate over Jewish immigration, James Moffett, who was chairman of the board of the Bahrain Petroleum Company and who was representing his parent company Socal, met with Wallace Murray, the State

⁸⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1933, The British Commonwealth, Europe, Near East and Africa, Volume II*, eds. Rogers P. Churchill, Matilda F. Axton, Newton O. Sappington, Morrison B. Giffen, and Francis C. Prescott (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1949), Document 758, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1933v02/d758>.

⁸⁸ Miller, *Search for Security*, 41-42, and Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 48-50.

⁸⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1934, General, the British Commonwealth, Volume I*, Document 660, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v01/d660>, Document 663, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v01/d663>, and Document 664, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1934v01/d664>.

Department's Chief of the Near Eastern Affairs Division. Moffett expressed concern that Ibn Saud had become less amenable to Casoc expanding its operations and was drawing closer to Britain. He further warned that the American government's support for Zionist claims in Palestine might lead the king to expel Socal and Texaco.⁹⁰

It was in Socal's interest that the American government establish more direct relations with Saudi Arabia, and as early as 1936 the company's executives began pushing the State Department to accredit a minister to the kingdom. Though the American Consul General in Cairo decided that American interests were insufficient to warrant establishing official representation, Socal continued lobbying for diplomatic representation in Saudi Arabia, and the State Department finally changed its mind in 1939.⁹¹ By then, Casoc had over 325 Americans employed in Saudi Arabia, and American financial interests had grown significantly since 1933.⁹² Furthermore, in early 1939, Germany and Japan dispatched their diplomats in the Middle East to Saudi Arabia as a prelude to negotiating trade deals.⁹³ Secretary of State Cordell Hull, along with the American Ministers in Cairo and Baghdad, cited the interest of the other major powers in the kingdom as a reason for why the State Department ought to establish diplomatic representation in Saudi Arabia.⁹⁴ In the

⁹⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1937, The British Commonwealth, Europe, Near East and Africa, Volume II*, eds. Matilda F. Axton et al. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1954), Document 687, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1937v02/d687>.

⁹¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1939, The Far East; The Near East and Africa, Volume IV*, eds. Matilda F. Axton et al. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955), Document 866, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1939v04/d866>, and Document 871, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1939v04/d871>.

⁹² *Ibid.*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1939v04/d869> and <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1939v04/d870>.

⁹³ "Reich Envoy to Ibn Saud: German Paper Sees Chance for Trade Gains in Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, January 15, 1939, and "Japan Seeks Arabian Oil: Trade Pack with Saudi Arabia Reported Being Negotiated," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1939.

⁹⁴ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1939, The Far East; The Near East and Africa, Volume IV*, Document 869, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1939v04/d869>, Document 870, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1939v04/d870>, and Document 871, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1939v04/d871>.

summer of 1939, President Roosevelt nominated Bert Fish, already the American Minister in Egypt, to serve as Minister to Saudi Arabia, and Fish was accredited in February of 1940.⁹⁵

Ibn Saud continued to face financial difficulties. The number of pilgrims making the Hajj, which had finally started recovering from its trough in the Great Depression, plummeted once more with the outbreak of global war, causing tax and customs revenues to crater.⁹⁶ Making matters worse, Saudi Arabia suffered from below-average rainfall in the early 1940s, causing the Saudi clans (on whose support Ibn Saud depended) to lose much of their livestock and threatening to plunge the kingdom into famine.⁹⁷ Ibn Saud requested a loan of \$6 million from Casoc, once again seeking to cover the country's necessary expenses, but Casoc only managed to deliver \$1 million.⁹⁸ Fearing this was a prelude to their being asked to shoulder more of the kingdom's financial burdens, but also not wanting to jeopardize their concession, Socal and Texaco executives decided to approach the American government about the issue.⁹⁹

James Moffett met with President Roosevelt on April 9, 1941, hoping to persuade the President to extend financial support to Saudi Arabia. Moffett explained Saudi Arabia's dire financial straits, claimed that Ibn Saud was "strongly pro-Ally" and second to none in terms of prestige among Arabs and Muslims all over the world, and warned that if Ibn Saud's budget of \$10 million was not covered, the kingdom, and possibly the entire Arab world, would be "thrown into chaos."¹⁰⁰ Moffett also noted that Socal and Texaco had 160,000 American stockholders

⁹⁵ "Named to Saudi Arabia: Fish to be Envoy as Relations Are Opened with Country," *The New York Times*, July 27, 1939, and "Diplomatic Contact Made with Ibn Saud: Fish, U.S. Minister, is Guest of the King of Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, February 6, 1940

⁹⁶ *Aramco Handbook*, 66, and *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers*, 1941, The British Commonwealth; The Near East and Africa, Volume III, Document 645, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d645>.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 45-46.

⁹⁹ Miller, *Search for Security*, 58-62.

¹⁰⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers*, 1941, The British Commonwealth; The Near East and Africa, Volume III, Document 645, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d645>.

between them. Though the war had put oil production on hold, the Casoc concession held great promise, as it was estimated to hold reserves of at least 750 million barrels.¹⁰¹ Moffett proposed that the government purchase \$6 million worth of finished oil products from the Saudis, for either military use or to sell outright.¹⁰² A few weeks later, Max Thornburg, the vice president of Bahrain Petroleum Company, met with the Division of Near East Affairs. Thornburg reiterated Moffett's proposal and promised that the Navy would not find cheaper oil anywhere else. He further stated that if Ibn Saud did not have the funds necessary to feed his people, he would likely align himself with the Axis powers.¹⁰³

Even though Roosevelt seemed amenable to Moffett's plan, it had a number of problems. Wallace Murray noted that there was no way to sell the oil in Europe or Asia because of the war, which meant it would have to be transported to the Western Hemisphere.¹⁰⁴ Murray proposed that the government cover half of the \$6 million shortfall by sending supplies to Saudi Arabia under the Lend-Lease Act, with the Navy purchasing enough oil to cover the other half.¹⁰⁵ However, Secretary of Navy Frank Knox determined that none of the finished oil products in question were of good enough quality for military use. In a memo to Roosevelt, Knox said he understood the importance of securing Ibn Saud's support, but there was no good reason for entangling such support in the deal Moffett proposed.¹⁰⁶ The idea of using lend-lease fell through when Jesse Jones, the Secretary of Commerce and Federal Loan Administrator, opposed it on the grounds that "the national interest was not going to be served by extending financial assistance to a backward,

¹⁰¹ Anderson, *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia*, 30-31.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Document 647, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d647>.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Document 646, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d646>.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Document 652, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d652>. According to Knox, the gasoline had insufficient octane to be used as aviation fuel, while the diesel's high sulfur content was above the Navy's maximum of 1% and would cause engine corrosion.

corrupt, and non-democratic society like Saudi Arabia. Such aid amounted to paying homage to a self-styled monarch while at the same time using the government to support the interests of private enterprise.”¹⁰⁷

Rather than extending aid directly to Saudi Arabia, whether by purchasing oil or through lend-lease, the American government decided instead to ask the United Kingdom to take care of Ibn Saud’s finances. Roosevelt, not wishing to provoke the isolationists in Congress, doubted whether the Lend-Lease Act authorized the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to provide money to a neutral nation, and both Jones and Roosevelt agreed that Saudi Arabia was ultimately Britain’s responsibility.¹⁰⁸ Roosevelt wrote to Jones, “Will you tell the British I hope they can take care of the King of Saudi-Arabia. This is a little far afield for us!”¹⁰⁹ Jones told British treasury officials to furnish Ibn Saud with whatever money they felt desirable, and instructed the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to earmark the \$10 million that Ibn Saud had requested into a \$450 million lend-lease loan to the United Kingdom.¹¹⁰

Realizing an indirect loan would annoy both Ibn Saud and Socal executives, the State Department responded to both parties’ concerns in August of 1941. Murray took a meeting with the Presidents of Casoc and the Bahrain Petroleum Company, where he explained how Jones planned to get the money to Saudi Arabia, stating that the government believed the kingdom was in the British sphere of influence and that Britain had more experience with these sorts of subsidies.¹¹¹ The executives complained that if Americans put up the money, America ought to

¹⁰⁷ Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold*, 106-107.

¹⁰⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1941, The British Commonwealth; The Near East and Africa, Volume III, Document 661*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d661>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Miller, *Search for Security*, 69-70, and Chester, *US Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 234.

¹¹¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1941, The British Commonwealth; The Near East and Africa, Volume III, Document 662*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d662>.

get the credit. They assured Murray the Navy's concerns over the quality of the oil were unfounded and promised they could deliver up to \$500,000 worth of oil per month if provided with tankers, but the government remained unmoved.¹¹² Meanwhile, Cordell Hull instructed Alexander Kirk, who had succeeded Bert Fish as Minister in Egypt, to explain to Ibn Saud that Britain would continue its subsidy for the time being and while the United States would be willing to consider other ways of assisting his government, due to the circumstances of the war, it would only be prudent to extend lend-lease aid to countries that were "actively resisting external aggression, or which for geographical reasons are important to the national defense."¹¹³ Fearing that the latter clause would be perceived as an insult by Ibn Saud in particular, and the entire message as an endorsement of British imperialism in the Middle East more broadly, Kirk drafted a more concise message informing the king that it was simply not possible to provide lend-lease aid under existing legislation.¹¹⁴

Even if Saudi Arabia was not vital to American national defense, the United States and the United Kingdom nonetheless took an interest in the country. Importantly, Allied interest was not due to Saudi Arabia being a major oil producer. Besides the quality issues Knox identified with Saudi oil, both Iran and Iraq still produced far more oil than Saudi Arabia in the early 1940s, and oil production dropped off precipitously across the Middle East due to the war.¹¹⁵ Nor was it because Saudi Arabia had become a belligerent in the war, which would not happen until February of 1945. Rather, their interest stemmed from the country's geography and its relation to their military strategy, and in fact strongly paralleled historic British strategic concerns regarding the maintenance of her empire. The ports and supply routes necessary to ship lend-lease materiel to

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, Document 663, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d663>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Document 664, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d664>.

¹¹⁵ Miller, *Search for Security*, 80.

the Soviet Union were all located in the Middle East.¹¹⁶ Additionally, by March of 1942, the War Department determined that the Arabian Peninsula was ideally suited for refueling planes flying between eastern Africa and India.¹¹⁷ The State Department subsequently asked the Saudis about flight authorizations and air basing in July, and managed to secure the former in August, although the Saudis did not agree to the latter until after the end of the war.¹¹⁸ State Department officials also agreed with near unanimity that as the custodian of Mecca and Medina, Ibn Saud's word carried special weight with the global Muslim population, a conclusion also reached by the British Foreign Office some decades before.¹¹⁹

On the other hand, should Axis forces manage to overrun the Middle East, which seemed a real possibility prior to El Alamein, the Allied strategic situation would become dire. German military planners were aware that they would need to secure the Arab Middle East and Persia if they wished to open a new front against either the Soviet Union or British India.¹²⁰ Germany and Italy also took into account Arab resentment towards British imperialism, issuing radio broadcasts in Arabic declaring that Axis victory would lead to the liberation of the Middle East.¹²¹ Hull noted in his memoir that the Middle East was the logical place for German and Japanese forces to link the European and Pacific theaters, and an Axis victory there would effectively cut the world in two.¹²² Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes warned Roosevelt that a German victory against Russia

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹¹⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1942, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV*, eds. William M. Franklin and E. B. Perkins (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963), Document 675, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v04/d675>

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Document 678, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v04/d678>, and Document 684, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v04/d684>.

¹¹⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1940, General, Volume I*, eds. Matilda F. Axton and Shirley L. Phillips (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1959), Document 43, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1940v01/d43>.

¹²⁰ Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 270, and Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 354.

¹²¹ Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, 270, and Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 321.

¹²² Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 56-57.

in the Caucasus and Britain in the Middle East would secure colossal oil reserves for the Third Reich.¹²³ The military began drafting contingency plans to protect the Saudi oil fields from German and Italian forces, ultimately deciding to install anti-aircraft guns in Dhahran and to train some Saudis and Casoc employees in the region as soldiers.¹²⁴

For these reasons, the American and British governments both courted the kingdom's friendship during the early years of World War II. British representatives met with the Saudi royal family in August of 1941 and, seeking to remain in their good graces, Ibn Saud expelled the German Minister in Iraq (who also served as the Reich's envoy to Saudi Arabia) from the kingdom, exhorted his subjects to cooperate with the Allies, and interned Italian and German sailors rescued from ships sunk in the Red Sea.¹²⁵ The State Department, eager to lessen Ibn Saud's disappointment after declining to extend lend-lease, fast-tracked a proposal by Karl Twitchell to send experts in agriculture and ground water resources as advisors to the king.¹²⁶ The agricultural mission to Saudi Arabia was formally authorized in February of 1942, with Twitchell himself chosen to lead it. The State Department confidentially notified Kirk that the War Department hoped to establish airfields in Saudi Arabia and would be assigning an officer to accompany the mission when it arrived in Cairo, who would report back to Washington the preliminary results from their surveys.¹²⁷ Citing the importance of the war effort in the Middle East and the Air Force's interest in having airfields in Saudi Arabia, Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles also drafted

¹²³ Miller, *Search for Security*, 81.

¹²⁴ Chester, *US Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 234-35, and *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers*, 1942, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV, Document 700, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v04/d700>.

¹²⁵ "Arabian Meeting Held Pro-British: Tribal Elders Assembled to Hear Message of Ibn Saud, King of Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, August 31, 1941.

¹²⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers*, 1941, The British Commonwealth; The Near East and Africa, Volume III, Document 679, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941v03/d679>.

¹²⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers*, 1942, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV, Document 671, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v04/d671>.

a letter for Roosevelt to send to Ibn Saud expressing his goodwill.¹²⁸ This prompted the first of several exchanges of letters between the two heads of state.

IV

If there was a single turning point in American foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia, it occurred in 1943. This was the year the Allies reversed Axis military gains in North Africa; as a result, American government officials became less concerned with preventing Middle Eastern oil reserves from falling into Nazi hands. Instead, in the final two years of World War II, the American government began taking a longer view, turning its attention to keeping the peace after the war was over. Military planners and state department officials determined a secure supply of oil was necessary to prevent future conflicts. Not only would such a supply sustain the American armed forces, it would also be vital for meeting civilian demand, which would undoubtedly increase once the war was over. Saudi Arabia, with its vast oil reserves, served as a keystone in all of the various plans military and state department personnel drafted.

Wallace Murray and Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson both argued in favor of extending lend-lease to Saudi Arabia as a means of securing the country's significant oil reserves. Reminding the State Department that the United Kingdom had excluded American companies from Middle Eastern oil after World War I, Murray believed the United States government should preempt the British from using their subsidy to gain leverage in the kingdom.¹²⁹ Casoc oilmen, still lobbying for financial assistance to Saudi Arabia, also encouraged the government to take a longer view. Social executives met with Harold Ickes on February 8, 1943. Rather than offering oil up front for the war effort as Moffett had done, they took a page from the American oil advocacy

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Document 670, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v04/d670>.

¹²⁹ Miller, *Search for Security*, 85-86 and Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 60-61.

groups during the 1920s and invoked the specter of an oil shortage. “The importance of this vast reserve of American controlled petroleum,” they said, “becomes increasingly apparent as demands on production within the United States point more and more to a decrease in our national reserves and an increase in our national consumption. Maximum efficient production from all domestic wells will soon be insufficient to meet this country’s expanding consumption and exports.”¹³⁰ Casoc proposed establishing a special reserve for the United States government, and suggested that the government might even acquire stock in the venture.¹³¹ This time, the company’s lobbying was successful. Roosevelt authorized lend-lease to Saudi Arabia on February 18, 1943. In contrast with Jesse Jones’ comment back in 1941 about the national interest, Roosevelt found that “the defense of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defense of the United States,” and noted that the White House stated its conviction that the Muslim world was firmly on the side of the Allies.¹³² Saudi Arabia had become far too important for the country’s budget to be sustained by a British subsidy alone, and for the remainder of the war the United States would split aid to Saudi Arabia 50-50 with Britain.

Shortly after the last Axis forces pulled out of North Africa in June of 1943, the Joint Chiefs of Staff determined that domestic oil production was too low to meet military and essential civilian needs, making it imperative that the government acquire proven reserves in other parts of the world. In a memo to the President, the Joint Chiefs recommended the Reconstruction Finance Corporation establish a new, separate entity that would purchase a controlling interest for the American government in the Saudi Arabian concession, with the ability to secure additional

¹³⁰ “Investigation of the National Defense Program.” Senate 80:2. April 28, 1948.

¹³¹ Miller, *Search for Security*, 96-97.

¹³² *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV, Document 893*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d893>.

foreign oil reserves.¹³³ Meeting with Cordell Hull, the Joint Chiefs stated it was necessary to build a refinery in al-Hasa and to increase Saudi production as soon as possible, noting that Casoc had not yet extracted very much oil from Saudi Arabia's estimated reserves.¹³⁴ Hull rejected the Joint Chiefs' proposals for direct government involvement in Saudi oil operations. Instead, he recommended the government assist Socal and Texaco with oil production and refinery construction, while making deals with the two companies to set aside whatever reserves the Army and Navy believed necessary.¹³⁵ Kirk would also oppose direct government involvement in oil operations later that summer. He noted that Ibn Saud had appreciated the United States' lack of an ulterior motive in the Middle East up to that point, and pointed out such a move risked opening the government "to the accusation of economic penetration for political purposes."¹³⁶ Since Casoc was capable of meeting the military's production quota, Kirk argued, it would be better to collaborate with the private sector on oil production, "with direct government participation in the national life of the respective countries limited to those fields in which our own enlightened altruism cannot be impugned and which are fertile ground for the development of good will."¹³⁷

On June 25, 1943, officials from the Departments of State, War, Navy, and Interior drafted plans for the Petroleum Reserve Corporation, which would have as its board of directors the Secretaries of each of the four departments. As its first order of business, the Petroleum Reserve Corporation would attempt to purchase 100% of the stock in Casoc from Socal and Texaco.¹³⁸ If a stock purchase was not possible, the officials recommended that the Petroleum Reserve Corporation take up Casoc's offer to set aside a percentage of its estimated reserves for the

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Document 990, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d990>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Document 992, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d992>.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Document 999, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d999>.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, Document 993, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d993>.

government and that the Corporation negotiate a contract with the company securing the right to order oil production and delivery from this reserve at a fixed cost.¹³⁹ Roosevelt authorized the Petroleum Reserve Corporation in July, and officials from the four departments spent the next several months negotiating as discreetly as they could with Casoc, Texaco, and the Saudi government.¹⁴⁰ However, the Petroleum Reserve Corporation's attempt to purchase stock ultimately fell through when the Corporation and the companies could not agree on the stock price. It is possible that Socal and Texaco never actually had any interest in selling stock to the government. On the other hand, at the end of 1943 the Casoc concession was at much less risk of being bombed or seized by Axis forces than it had been at the beginning of the year, and it is also possible that the companies felt more confident demanding a higher price than the government was willing to pay.¹⁴¹

American government officials were also starting to realize that Saudi oil reserves were far larger than the estimate of 750 million barrels Moffett had cited when he first approached the government in 1941. A survey team headed by Evelyn DeGolyer determined that the entire Middle East had truly colossal oil reserves, with Saudi Arabia alone having up to five billion barrels worth of oil.¹⁴² In his February 1944 report, DeGolyer predicted that global oil production's center of gravity would shift from the Gulf of Mexico to the Persian Gulf in the coming years.¹⁴³ Oil production costs in the Middle East were low, only 10 to 15 cents per barrel, and though not many wells had been drilled in the region up to that point, of those that had been, almost all proved to be

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Document 994, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d994>, and Document 1004, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d1004>.

¹⁴¹ Chester, *US Oil Policy and Diplomacy*, 236-37, and Miller, *Search for Security*, 110-112.

¹⁴² Evelyn DeGolyer, "Preliminary Report of the Technical Oil Mission to the Middle East," *Bulletin of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists*, 28:7 (July 1944): 919-23.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

big producers.¹⁴⁴ At the same time, Casoc informed the State Department that the company hoped to build both a refinery at Dhahran and a trans-Arabian oil pipeline capable of moving oil from al-Hasa to a port somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁴⁵ The President of Casoc highlighted the strategic values of these proposed projects, noting that the trans-Arabian pipeline would “introduce a new factor of high importance into the political and economic problems already facing the governments which are vitally concerned in the development and world-wide distribution of Near East oil.”¹⁴⁶

The State Department, the Interior Department, and the Army-Navy Petroleum Board reached a consensus on a new foreign policy at the beginning of 1944, one centered on the American-held concession in Saudi Arabia. The Petroleum Board determined that neither present wartime demand nor the expected peacetime civilian demand could be met with the Western Hemisphere’s oil reserves alone (let alone the oil reserves within American borders).¹⁴⁷ Therefore, to safeguard “hemispheric security,” it would be necessary to conserve the Western Hemisphere’s oil reserves so as to meet future military and civilian needs.¹⁴⁸ To achieve this goal, a group of State Department officials recommended a three-pronged foreign policy. The government should, first, curtail the flow of petroleum from the Americas to the Eastern Hemisphere; second, encourage expansion of Middle Eastern oil production to supply the global market, especially

¹⁴⁴ “Asian Oil Deal Tied to Foreign Policy: PRC to Build Pipeline from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the Mediterranean,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 1944.

¹⁴⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV, Document 883*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d883>, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, The Far East, Volume V*, eds. E. Ralph Perkins et al. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965), Document 6, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d6>, and “Refinery Planned for Arabian Oil: U.S. Concerns to Begin at Once to Develop Near East Sources for the Allies,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1944.

¹⁴⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, The Far East, Volume V, Document 6*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d6>.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Document 14, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d14>.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Document 21, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d21>.

Europe; and third, push for an open-door policy in all Middle Eastern concessions where American businesses had a stake.¹⁴⁹

Harold Ickes and Cordell Hull each pursued two different strategies to achieve these goals. Ickes, still in contact with Casoc oilmen, was convinced that the United States needed to outmaneuver the British in Saudi Arabia in order to prevent a repeat of Britain's exclusion of American companies after World War I.¹⁵⁰ Ickes and Knox had both supported the government buying stock in Casoc, but the deal had come to nothing.¹⁵¹ Ickes therefore championed a proposal by Commodore Andrew Carter of the Army-Navy Petroleum Board. Carter recommended that the United States government assume construction of the trans-Arabian pipeline from Casoc and authorize the construction of the proposed refinery at Dhahran in exchange for the right to purchase oil from the company at a fixed rate and a contract holding at least one billion barrels in reserve.¹⁵² In February of 1944, Ickes got the President, the Petroleum Reserve Corporation, and representatives from Gulf Oil, Socal, and Texaco to agree to a deal based on Carter's proposal that included a clause prohibiting the companies from selling oil to any government or nationals of a country not approved by the State Department.¹⁵³ Ickes announced to the press that the Petroleum Reserve Corporation sought to cooperate with and promote the private oil industry rather than compete with it, and stated that the agreement would "assure an adequate supply of petroleum for

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Document 21, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d21>, and Document 26, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d26>. The State Department hoped to focus increasing production in the so-called oil axis, geologically similar sedimentary basins in and around the eastern Mediterranean, Black, Caspian and Red Seas and the Persian Gulf. The Department noted that Russia and Romania were relatively large oil producers, but that Russian production would be barely adequate to meet the country's industrial requirements and that Romanian reserves would not be sufficient to meet all of Europe's demand.

¹⁵⁰ Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold*, 109.

¹⁵¹ Miller, *Search for Security*, 127-128.

¹⁵² *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, The Far East, Volume V, Document 14*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d14>.

¹⁵³ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, The Far East, Volume V, Document 19*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d19>, and "U.S. to Lay Oil Line in Near East; 1,200 Mile Pipe to Aid Our Forces," *The New York Times*, February 6, 1944.

the military and naval needs of the United States in view of the obligations for which this country must assume for the maintenance of collective security in the post-war world.”¹⁵⁴

However, Ickes’ deal ran into stiff opposition. Other oil companies feared that a glut of eastern Mediterranean oil would cut into their profits in Europe, and lobbied conservative members of Congress from oil-producing states to oppose the deal.¹⁵⁵ Much of the press was also not sympathetic to the plan. *The New Republic* labeled the pipeline agreement an appeasement of oil companies and “a situation that looks dangerously like old-fashioned dollar diplomacy at its worst,” while *Christian Century* stated “the principal consequences of this deal will be that the people of the United States will underwrite with the blood of their sons the investment of three oil companies.”¹⁵⁶ *The New York Times*, while not overtly hostile to the pipeline proposal, still called such government involvement in the private oil industry unprecedented.¹⁵⁷ The proposal was dropped and Aramco ultimately ended up constructing both the trans-Arabian pipeline and the Dhahran refinery itself.

Hull, meanwhile, remained skeptical of direct government involvement in Middle Eastern petroleum, preferring the use of diplomatic channels to increase the region’s oil production. In a memo to Roosevelt, Hull stated that developing the region’s oil resources was tremendously important in both the short- and long-term, and because Middle Eastern oil was held almost entirely by the British and the Americans, it would be prudent for the two countries to cooperate.¹⁵⁸ Hull arranged for the British to negotiate with officials from the Departments of State and Interior.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ “U.S. to Lay Oil Line in Near East; 1,200 Mile Pipe to Aid Our Forces,” *The New York Times*, February 6, 1944.

¹⁵⁵ Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 139-141.

¹⁵⁶ “Pipeline in Arabia,” *The New Republic*, February 14, 1944, and “Oil Leads to Tie in Near East,” *Christian Century*, February 16, 1944.

¹⁵⁷ “Asian Oil Deal Tied to Foreign Policy: PRC to Build Pipeline from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the Mediterranean,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 1944.

¹⁵⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers*, 1943, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV, Document 1009, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d1009>.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

To preempt the British from leveraging their subsidy in a *quid pro quo* for Saudi oil, Hull also encouraged Roosevelt to increase lend-lease aid to Saudi Arabia sixfold so as to match British financial support.¹⁶⁰ Hull even requested that Ickes put his negotiations with Casoc and Gulf Oil on hold unless and until the United States and the United Kingdom agreed on the American government's direct participation in Middle Eastern oil.¹⁶¹ Ickes refused, telling Hull that the pipeline deal concerned no other governments except those of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and that even if the American government did directly involve itself with Casoc's and Gulf's operations, it would merely be placing itself on par with the British government.¹⁶² The two countries reached an agreement in the summer of 1944, which, among other provisions, upheld the principle of equal treatment in the two countries' respective oil concessions.¹⁶³ However, like Ickes' pipeline plan, the agreement ran into opposition from Congress and from the American oil industry. Though it was sent to the Senate for redrafting, neither Roosevelt nor Truman pushed for the oil agreement's passage and it ultimately languished in committee.¹⁶⁴

Though neither Ickes nor Hull were able to overcome resistance from the American oil industry, the United States nonetheless escalated its military and financial commitments to Saudi Arabia in the final years of World War II. It was at this time that the broad contours of American policy with respect to Saudi Arabia during much of the Cold War took form. A group of Saudi dignitaries that included two of Ibn Saud's sons, Emirs Faisal and Khalid, visited Washington in October of 1943. The State Department agreed to expedite delivery of trucks and radio equipment

¹⁶⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, The Far East, Volume V, Document 740*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d740>.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d7>.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d10>.

¹⁶³ For a review of British and American correspondence leading up to the agreement, see Miller, *Search for Security*, 134-138.

¹⁶⁴ Stoff, *Oil, War, and American Security*, 181-84 and 192-94, and Miller, *Search for Security*, 139-140.

under lend-lease and to lend over five million ounces of United States Treasury silver to the kingdom.¹⁶⁵ Wallace Murray also brought up the Department's intent to establish a consulate near the proposed Dhahran refinery, citing the large number of American nationals working in al-Hasa.¹⁶⁶ The State Department finally broached the War Department's planned airbase at Dhahran with the Saudi government in July of 1944.¹⁶⁷ The military determined that an airbase at Dhahran was "necessary for the prosecution of the war in the Pacific," and the State Department signed on to the plan because of the expected increase in the number of Americans working at Dhahran.¹⁶⁸ However, the Saudis initially said no, and the State Department eventually determined that the British had instructed them not to approve the project.¹⁶⁹ In September of 1944, the Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister asked the State Department about the possibility of extending a loan, complaining that the combined supplies and financial aid the kingdom received from Britain and America was insufficient.¹⁷⁰ The Deputy Foreign Minister also stated Ibn Saud feared that the United States would withdraw from Arabia after the end of the war and turn inwards as she had done historically.¹⁷¹

Roosevelt met with a number of African and Middle Eastern heads of state immediately following the Yalta Conference, including Ibn Saud on February 14, 1945, with whom he hoped to address these issues. Colonel William Eddy, who served as translator, recorded Ibn Saud

¹⁶⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, The Near East and Africa, Volume IV, Document 879*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d879>, and Document 881, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d881>.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d882>.

¹⁶⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, The Far East, Volume V, Document 717*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d717>.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Document 723, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d723>, and Document 724, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d724>.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Document 801, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944v05/d801>. The Deputy Foreign Minister claimed the total aid Saudi Arabia received from both countries in 1944 was less than the British financial subsidy alone had been in 1943.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

discussing Winston Churchill and British machinations with Roosevelt. Ibn Saud recounted the British telling him that the Americans would turn their focus back to the Western Hemisphere when the war ended, and that the kingdom's security and economic stability should be "bound up with British foreign policy."¹⁷² Roosevelt assured the king that American commitments to Saudi Arabia would not diminish in the slightest when the war ended, expressing hope that spheres of influence would be replaced by the Open Door, and that "the United States hopes the door of Saudi Arabia will be open for her and for other nations."¹⁷³ For his part, Ibn Saud agreed to finally join the war as a belligerent, and Saudi Arabia declared war on Germany shortly after the meeting.

When Roosevelt returned to Washington, he had the State Department redouble efforts to provide additional financial aid to the kingdom. The British government wanted to reduce aid to Saudi Arabia in 1945 to no more than \$10 million, with the United States and the United Kingdom still splitting the financial burden evenly.¹⁷⁴ However, the State Department calculated that the Saudis would require between \$15 million and \$18 million in supplies and funds.¹⁷⁵ The State Department informed the British Embassy that although it wished to continue the 50-50 split, it fully intended to cover the Saudi budget for the upcoming year and would not accept an insufficient aid package.¹⁷⁶ Shortly after Truman was sworn in, the State Department explained to him that the Export-Import Bank had been asked to extend a development loan to Saudi Arabia, but this would not cover the kingdom's budget shortfall, which the Department predicted would last for the next

¹⁷² *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, The Near East and Africa, Volume VIII*, eds. Herbert A. Fine, Ralph R. Goodwin, John P. Glennon, Rogers P. Churchill, and Laurence Evans (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), Document 6, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d6>.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Document 848, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d848>, and Document 857, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d857>.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Document 857, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d857>, and Document 859, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d859>.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Document 861, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d861>.

five years.¹⁷⁷ To illustrate Saudi Arabia's vital strategic importance to the new President, Dean Acheson showed Truman a map of the Middle East's oil reserves superimposed over the United States and explained the colossal size of the Persian Gulf region's proven reserves.¹⁷⁸ Truman authorized the State Department to proceed with its planned material and financial aid, and carved out an exception for Saudi Arabia authorizing continued lend-lease to the kingdom through the rest of the year, even as he terminated lend-lease to most of the other Allies in August of 1945.¹⁷⁹ That month, the United States finally surpassed the United Kingdom in financial commitment to Saudi Arabia, provisioning \$11 million in aid compared to Britain's \$5 million.¹⁸⁰

While negotiating financial support for Saudi Arabia, the State Department was also continuing its efforts to bring the Dhahran airfield to fruition. State Department officials approached the British Joint Chiefs of Staff who agreed to support the project as long as Britain was given fly-over and landing rights, and the Foreign Office notified the Saudis that they were withdrawing their objection in May of 1945.¹⁸¹ Ironically, although the War Department had expected to use the airfield to redeploy troops from Europe to the Pacific, by June, the war situation was such that it no longer believed the project was a military necessity.¹⁸² Nevertheless, even after Japan had surrendered, the Secretaries of War, Navy, and State agreed that the Dhahran airfield was in the national interest. Not only would it be useful for civilian aviation, it would also ensure that the Aramco concession remained in American hands.¹⁸³ Truman gave the go-ahead, and the

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Document 880, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d880>.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Document 882, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d882>.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Document 934, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d934>, and Document 972, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d972>. Saudi Arabia was one of only three countries to receive this designation.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Document 920, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d920>.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Document 885, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d855>, and Document 867, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d867>.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, Document 895, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d895>.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, Document 895, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d895>, and Document 929, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d929>.

military finished the airbase in February of 1946.¹⁸⁴ With the onset of the Cold War, the Dhahran airbase would quickly regain its military importance. It enabled the United States Air Force to fly bombers into Soviet airspace from the southwest and protected a huge reserve of oil that military planners believed absolutely necessary if the United States was to defend Western Europe or fight a global war.¹⁸⁵

The effects of World War II on American-Saudi diplomacy did not end with victory over Japan, despite the War Department's determination that the kingdom would be important to the Pacific theater in the final months of the war. Nor, as Ibn Saud had feared, did American strategic planning or diplomacy in the Persian Gulf region revert to a pre-war normal, even after the government finally terminated lend-lease. Instead, the American government's interest in Arabian oil as a matter of the national interest, as well as its military presence in the Persian Gulf, would remain constant throughout the Cold War. It is true that in the years after 1946 a number of new issues would arise that would affect American foreign policy with respect to Saudi Arabia. Some concerns, such as shared opposition to Soviet communism and Arab unification, helped align the United States and Saudi Arabia in pursuit of common goals. Others, such as the partition of Israel and Palestine, created tension between the two countries. But none of these issues would fundamentally alter the presence of the American oil industry in Saudi Arabia, nor of America's foreign policy that took form at the end of World War II.

Conclusion

This analysis has focused on explaining the origins and development of American-Saudi diplomacy, and the complexity of America's national interests in the Arabia Peninsula. National

¹⁸⁴ "U.S. Builds Big Airfield in Saudi Arabia for Use by the Military for Three Years," *The New York Times*, February 8, 1946.

¹⁸⁵ Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, 57-58.

interest in diplomacy is not something that a government decides unilaterally, but is instead a consensus reached by diplomatic and military staff, whose decisions are regularly influenced by private actors. In the case of American foreign policy in Saudi Arabia, the notion that the kingdom and its oil were vitally important to the American national interest was not self-evident to any independent observer. Indeed, well into World War II, American government officials dismissed the kingdom as irrelevant to the American national interest. Rather, growing awareness of America's national interest in Saudi oil was a product of decisions made by both oil company executives and government bureaucrats, and was contingent upon the specific circumstances of World War II. As this analysis has demonstrated, the American oil industry played a pivotal role in shaping government policy from the end of World War I onward, and Socal's contact with the State Department not only shaped but drove much of United States foreign policy in Saudi Arabia between 1928 and 1946. The wholly American owned and operated Casoc concession was almost always front-and-center in the minds of bureaucrats during the 1930s and 1940s. During the interwar period and World War II, Saudi oil became central to the American government's strategic planning, which was in many respects similar to that of the United Kingdom in prior decades, as the United States government took an increasing interest in the kingdom's geography, its oil reserves, and its potential for strategically located transportation routes and military bases.

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