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## Confronting the Early Relationship Between the United States and Saudi Arabia

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**Confronting the Early Relationship Between the United States and Saudi Arabia**

**By**

**Alexandra Bell**

Senior Seminar: HST 499  
Professor John L. Rector  
Western Oregon University  
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In February of 1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt gifted a fully equipped C-47 to King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia—inadvertently creating the first Rolls-Royce since the start of World War II. Winston Churchill expedited the creation of a custom-made Rolls-Royce for King Ibn Saud in order to rival America's gift of a military aircraft.<sup>1</sup> Two of the world's most powerful Western powers contended for the favor of King Ibn Saud because of the West's desperate need for Middle Eastern oil. In the aftermath of World War II, oil in the Middle East became an important point of concession for the new oil dependent world—particularly in oil deficient Europe. The U.S. oil company Standard Oil Company of California (CASOC) pumped oil from Saudi Arabia to sell internationally since 1938, thus giving the U.S. a stake in the oil trade and Saudi Arabia a much-needed economic boost. This marked the beginning of the long-lasting relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia based on co-dependency for oil production. The nature of the U.S.-Saudi relationship turned more political as the Cold War progressed and Saudi Arabia proved to be a reliant ally against Soviet communism in the region. The Saudi Royal Family's reliance upon the fundamental form of Islam known as Wahhabism made Saudi Arabia the perfect ally to stop the spread of atheistic communism in the Middle East. The U.S. continued to give the King of Saudi Arabia the latest military equipment to ensure the Kingdom survived and thereby carry out U.S. interests in the region. Originally, the prioritized protection of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was to ensure the protection of oil production, but the country served well against the fight of communism in the region from 1945 onwards. From 1945-1953 the United States replaced Britain as an imperial power in Southwest Asia by making Saudi Arabia financially and militarily dependent on it; the U.S. used this influence to support the creation of the state of Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Wallace, "Nabob's Chariot," *The Saturday Evening Post* (Indianapolis), November 8, 1947, accessed March 18, 2019, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/issues/1947-11-08/>.

During the Great Depression King Ibn Saud was looking to give an oil concessions to a Western power to make up revenue lost from the decline in pilgrims on Hajj.<sup>2</sup> One of the most important factors in the U.S.-Saudi relationship—oil—was officially established in 1933 with the Standard Oil Company of California. British oil companies had a monopoly on sources of known oil in Iraq, Iran, and other Gulf states. Larger oil companies such as Standard Oil of New Jersey (supplying 80 percent of allied oil during WWII) and Socony-Vacuum gained a total of 23.75 percent shares from Britain's Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). These larger American oil companies joined IPC on the condition that they would not look for oil within the old Ottoman Empire.<sup>3</sup> This allowed smaller companies like SOCAL to gain oil concession rights in the Persian Gulf. SOCAL found commercial levels of oil in 1938 under its subsidiary California Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC), later changed to Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO). After Saudi oil was found in commercial quantities, King Ibn Saud turned down larger bids for oil concessions in order to remain loyal to their agreement with SOCAL/CASOC.<sup>4</sup> Saudi Arabia hoped to bring the U.S. into a mostly British imperialist Middle East to stop Britain from extending its sphere of influence directly into Saudi Arabia. Additionally, King Ibn Saud showed willingness to side with the U.S. over intervening European powers—even when offered larger sums of money.

Three more American oil companies (Texas Oil Company (who bought out SOCAL), Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, and Socony Vacuum Oil Company) dropped their alliance

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<sup>2</sup> The Hajj is an annual pilgrimage made by millions of Muslims to the holy cities Mecca and Medina. Due to the Great Depression many would be pilgrims were not able to make it to Saudi Arabia. This greatly effected the Saudi Arabian economy.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Bronson, *Thicker than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-19.

with IPC to buy investments with from ARAMCO by 1948.<sup>5</sup> Without the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ensuring an American oil company received the concessions, the U.S.'s investment and involvement in the Middle East might have been severely limited. The government needed the concessionary money in order to keep its reign in the region. The Saud monarchy was willing to make a relationship with the U.S. work despite the unhappiness of their people dealing directly with the Americans drilling oil in the region.<sup>6</sup> Saudi Arabia choose to create close ties with U.S. oil companies because of their distrust of European powers (specifically Britain) and the U.S.'s strong economy.

Although the Saudi Arabian economy—and thus the population—depended on the oil revenue collected from sales to Western countries, the state religious practice of Wahhabism had a clear intolerance of those who do not practice this form of Islam. This sect of Islam does not only discriminate against followers of other religions, but also denies the validity of other sects of Islam. Wahhabism has driven a wedge against Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries as it justifies the Saud family's claim as guardians of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was first established in the mid-eighteenth century with an alliance made between the household of the founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, and the leader of the Saud house, Muhammad ibn Saud. The alliance between these two respected households is the foundation of the Kingdom. It is impossible to question the fundamentalist approach Wahhabism takes to Islam without also undermining the Saud's claim as protectors of the holy cities. Although Wahhabism has been used by the Saud regime to keep order amongst the people, the U.S. has also used Wahhabism to keep Communism at bay in

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<sup>5</sup> R. Narayanan, "A Review of Oil Contract Negotiations By Saudi Arabia With Aramco," *International Studies* 7, no. 4 (1965): 568-573, accessed March 9, 2019, doi:10.1177/002088176500700403.

<sup>6</sup> Abdul Rahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*. Beirut: Random House, 1987.

Southwest Asia by battling Arab nationalism and socialism. And though Saudi Arabia remains the U.S.'s closest ally in the Middle East, its perverse sect of Islam may threaten ties with Western allies which they depend on economically. The U.S.-Saudi policy of supporting fundamentalist Islam in Southwest Asia has had adverse effects for the U.S. because groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant justify their horrendous actions through Wahhabism.<sup>7</sup>

The Saudi Arabian government is consistently accused of abusing funds by Western media, but the structure of the Saudi Arabian government is based off an older monarchial system. In practice, the Saudi government used funds to buy off the loyalty of local tribes and clans to keep them happy.<sup>8</sup> In part, this system of buying loyalty is how King Ibn Saud was able to successfully take back power for the Saud family. The royal family is also accused of abusing funds for their personal lives, but the Saud family represent the state and control all funds and many positions of power remain in the family. Through this nepotism, the Princes participate in all posts within the government to gain experience. The monarchy of Saudi Arabia is unique in that the order of succession was determined largely by agnatic seniority until 2006. This type of monarchy promotes the brothers of the monarch as King before the sons of the monarch. This system ensures that brothers work to support the current monarch because they are eligible to rule. King Ibn Saud was adamant that his sons not fight over the throne because family infighting had destroyed the second reign of the Saud family. The familial structure of the government promotes the oldest and most well-trained brothers to governmental positions of power after they have gained enough experience. The structure of the Saudi government differs

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<sup>7</sup> Muharrem Hilmi Özev, "Saudi Society and the State: Ideational and Material Basis," (*Arab Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 2017): 1004, Accessed February 2018. doi:10.13169/arabstudquar.39.4.0996.

<sup>8</sup> Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*, 29-33.

so strongly from the U.S. that it is often looked down upon by Americans for being so traditional.

The study of U.S.-Saudi relations has increased since the attacks on the World Trade Centers on September 11 revealed that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens.<sup>9</sup> Historians set out to understand how one of the U.S.'s greatest allies in the Middle East became one of the biggest producers of terrorists in Southwest Asia and how this puts pressure on the once strong bond between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Rachel Bronson's *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* is the most extensively done research into U.S.-Saudi relations.<sup>10</sup> Her main argument is centered around three pillars that affect every aspect of the U.S.-Saudi relationship: oil, Saudi Arabia's strategic position in the region, and Saudi Arabia's intolerance for Communism based on religion.<sup>11</sup> These three pillars appealed to the U.S. throughout the twentieth century and ensured the U.S.-Saudi alliance remained intact. This paper will make use of Bronson's three pillars and build upon her established work to determine the U.S.'s ulterior motives in the Middle East.

Bruce Riedel's *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR* is another heavily researched account of the U.S.-Saudi relationship that documented the relationship the Saudi monarch's had with U.S. Presidents.<sup>12</sup> Riedel's career of working with the Central Intelligence Agency offers him valuable background to better explain the interpersonal workings of the Saud Royal Family. Like Bronson, Riedel covers the past between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia in order to better understand the present relationship. Riedel helped build the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>10</sup> Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*, 14-

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 21-27.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

modern U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia from 1980 until 2006 as CIA analyst and counter-terrorism expert. His book explores the unique relationship dynamic between U.S. Presidents and officials and members of the Saud royal family. The author's knowledge of and relationship to the royal family establishes the royal family's point of view. Riedel's book seeks to explain that Saudi Arabia has been a valuable U.S. ally and should not be discounted because of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Centers.<sup>13</sup>

The long-standing alliance between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia is not well understood, in part due to the stark differences of the two countries. The U.S. is a democratic nation that protects free speech and the right of freedom of the press. In contrast, the Saud Royal Family controls every aspect of the country's press and is considered an authoritarian monarchy. Geoff Simons reveals the negative aspects of the Kingdom in *Saudi Arabia: The Shape of a Client Feudalism*.<sup>14</sup> Simons focuses specifically on the corruption of the Saudi government and its human rights violations. Within the context of the U.S.-Saud relationship, the nepotism, corruption, and brutality within the Saudi government is often overlooked, while U.S. democracy is extolled. Simons clearly criticizes the U.S. for not demanding that Saudi Arabia modernize and adhere to human rights standards set by the United Nations. Comparisons made between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia based on laws and government structure are ineffective and unfair because Saudi Arabia is still classified as a developing country<sup>15</sup>—in addition to the religious and cultural differences of Saudi Arabia that make it difficult for the Saud Royal Family to change if they wanted to.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., ix-xv.

<sup>14</sup> Geoff Simons, *Saudi Arabia: The Shape of a Client Feudalism*, (NY: St. Martin's, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> "Human Development Reports," Developing Regions, *Human Development Reports*, accessed June 04, 2019, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/developing-regions>.



Saudi Arabia has immense power as an Islamic leader in the Middle East because it holds the two holiest cities in Islam. They are the self-proclaimed protectors of Mecca and Medina and they have the protection of the U.S. behind them. It is difficult to talk about the U.S. and Saudi Arabian relationship without bringing up other countries and events in the Middle East. As allies they attempt to control actions in the region. Robert Dreyfuss explores the effects of the U.S.'s intervention in the Middle East and explains how the U.S. has supported and expanded fundamentalist Islam in *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*.<sup>16</sup> He accuses Saudi Arabia of encouraging terrorist activities, in large part due to their adherence to Wahhabi Islam. Dreyfus describes U.S. as a backer of fundamentalist Islam—thus supporting Islamic terrorism and authoritarianism within the region. The Saud family is often connected to radical Islam, but Saudi Arabia had problems with internal radicals as well. The regime is often criticized for being too close to the U.S. by the rest of the Islamic world, despite their conservative practice of Islam.

Although Saudi Arabia is a developing country, but it is also considered a high-income country based on its gross domestic product (GPD).<sup>17</sup> Muharrem Hilmi Özev explores the economic reliance Saudi Arabia has on oil and the trouble this is causing Saudi Arabia in an increasingly less oil dependent world in his article: "Saudi Society and the State: Ideational and Material Basis."<sup>18</sup> Oil and gas exports are responsible for roughly 50 percent of Saudi Arabia's GPD and 85 percent of their export.<sup>19</sup> This was not as true before the oil boom of 1973. The country's government had a surplus of money and used it to modernize the state. Significant

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*, (Dell Publishing, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> "Human Development Reports," Developing Regions.

<sup>18</sup> Özev, "Saudi Society and the State."

<sup>19</sup> "Saudi Arabia," OPEC: Saudi Arabia, accessed February 01, 2018, [http://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/about\\_us/169.htm](http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/169.htm).

improvements were made to the economy, social welfare, and education. Before the oil boom, Saudi Arabia relied on foreign aid and trade revenue. After Saudi Arabia became a rentier state, the country became dependent on international relations to sell its oil. Özev sees a clear problem with Saudi Arabia depending upon oil revenue as its only source of income. Saudi Arabia's attempt to modernize conflicts with its welfare state system and the country doesn't have enough jobs to support its exploding population. The Saudis have relied on U.S. companies to buy oil in order to sustain the Kingdom, but Özev rightly sees this system of economic management as troublesome for the Saudi state.

The U.S. interest in Saudi Arabia grew from oil to its strategic geographic location and religious obligation to fight the spread of Communism in the aftermath of World War II. Oil remained an important factor in the U.S.'s actions in the Middle East and it was equally important in keeping the economy of Saudi Arabia healthy. The Truman administration ensured the loyalty of Saudi Arabia through economic and military support. When the U.S. declared support for the creation of Israel, Saudi Arabia could not afford to anger the U.S. though King Ibn Saud expressed his disappointment. The anti-imperialist U.S. Saudi Arabia allied with was expanding its interest in the Middle East as Britain left the region.

The growing need for oil in Europe and the U.S. after World War II ensured Western media covered events throughout the Middle East and the twentieth century. The importance of Saudi Arabia within the larger arena of Middle Eastern politics was not lost on journalists and foreign correspondents. Newspapers were heavily involved in covering the evolving political situation in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East because of the West's reliance upon oil. Besides the latest news coming out of the Middle East, articles covering the complicated political situation circulated throughout the U.S. and Europe in order to inform the public on foreign

affairs associated with Western interests. U.S. newspaper articles like “Nabob’s Chariot” by Irving Wallace sensationalized the Middle East but did not give an accurate portrayal of events in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Events in the Middle East were not well understood by the U.S. populace because news from Southwest Asia was not well represented. This left the U.S. government able to decide how to act in the Middle East without interference from the U.S. population—except for the better-informed Zionist lobby.

The U.S. and Britain worked closely with royal leaders of the Arab world to protect their oil investments in the Middle East. This correspondence between the U.S. government and Saudi Arabia is heavily documented in letters, concessions, diplomatic, and trade agreements. Letters between the President of the U.S. and the King of Saudi Arabia established the basis of U.S.-Saudi relations. They served to create an understanding between two leaders of nations fundamentally different in their ideologies. Reports made to President Truman discussing the “Palestine problem” were heavily biased by the Zionist lobby.<sup>21</sup> This influenced the Truman administration to support the creation of Israel, which strained relations between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. While there are many letters and correspondence between the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the U.S. available, there is a severe lack of Saudi documents because much of it is in Arabic. Additionally, Saudi Arabia doesn’t have a free media like the U.S. and therefore news outlets from Saudi Arabia cannot publicly criticize the government without fearing for their safety. These primary sources tell the story of the U.S.’s expansion into the Middle East and emphasizes the growing importance of Saudi Arabia to U.S. policy in Southwest Asia through the Cold War.

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<sup>20</sup> Irving Wallace, "Nabob's Chariot," 119-122.

<sup>21</sup> The “Palestine problem” references the questioning of Britain whether to allow Palestine to be governed by the native Arabs or give Palestine to the displaced European Jews.

The increase in the demand for oil is what originally caused the U.S. to seek oil concessions in the Middle East. When oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia the U.S. government became increasingly interested in establishing an embassy in Saudi Arabia.<sup>22</sup> The U.S. relied on oil economically and U.S. experts were afraid the U.S. would run out of oil during the Second World War.<sup>23</sup> The oil concession made between SOCAL and Saudi Arabia was incentivized through loans and economic profit to Saudi Arabia that the Kingdom desperately needed in order to keep their expanded territory under control. The U.S. government became officially involved with Saudi Arabia in 1943 when two sons of King Ibn Saud went to Washington DC to meet with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Additionally, the U.S. sent ambassadors and moved to set up an embassy the same year. Despite these earlier diplomatic effects, historians (U.S. and Saudi alike) agree the true beginning between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia started with the first and only meeting between King Ibn Saud and President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Valentine's day of 1945. Roosevelt died six weeks after the meeting, but he was able to gain the trust of the Saudi King in a single meeting.

Winston Churchill tried to imitate the American meeting with the Saudi's in Egypt days after the initial meeting between King Ibn Saud and Roosevelt, but he was insensitive to Islamic customs and King Ibn Saud was already wary of the imperialist country.<sup>24</sup> Roosevelt's administration established the practice of protecting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to protect American oil interests in the region. Bronson emphasizes, oil was not the only interest the U.S. had in Saudi Arabia. As the Cold War developed in the Middle East, the U.S. decided to use Saudi Arabia as a buffer to communist backed nationalism in the region. As When the Cold War

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<sup>22</sup> Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 21.

heated up, Saudi Arabia also appealed to the U.S. as a refueling station against the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup> The mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries would not have come to fruition if not for the Middle Eastern oil rush during the 1930s. The involvement of the U.S. in the region has become more complex through the years as a result of increasing U.S. involvement into Middle Eastern politics.

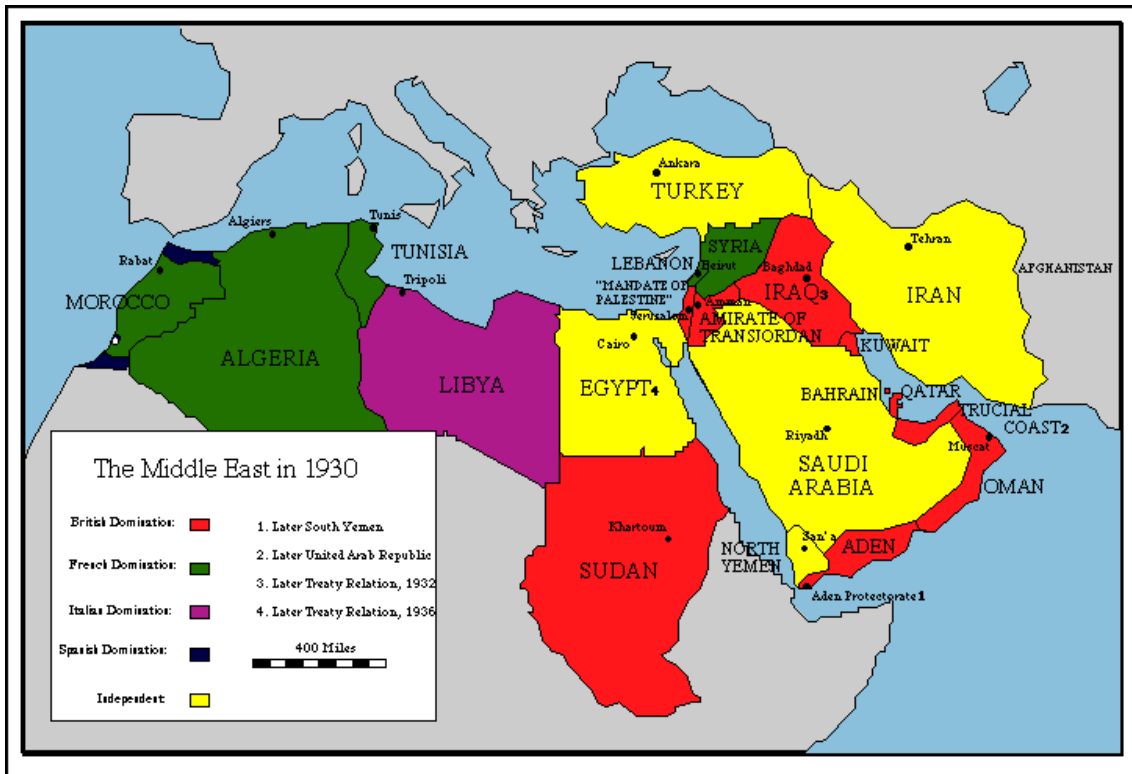


Figure 1, "The Middle East in 1930," Map, Middle East Maps, accessed May 25, 2019, <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~gov46/mideast-1930.gif>.

Britain was the prominent Western influence in the Middle East before World War II.

Figure 1 shows the extent of Western imperial influence in Southwest Asia, with Saudi Arabia being one of the only nations independent from European colonization and imperial tactics.<sup>26</sup>

Surrounded by the encroaching British Empire, Saudi Arabia felt their freedom threatened if they

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 15-17.

<sup>26</sup> "The Middle East in 1930," map, Middle East Maps, accessed May 25, 2019, <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~gov46/mideast-1930.gif>.

decided to ally with the British government and allow them oil concessions in the Eastern Province.<sup>27</sup> The first Kingdom of Saudi Arabia fell because of the Turkish lead Ottoman Empire. Therefore, King Ibn Saud did not trust the British Empire not to impose themselves upon his Kingdom. The threat of imperialism drove Saudi Arabia to give their available oil concessions to the U.S. oil company SOCAL.<sup>28</sup> The creation of the U.S.-Saudi alliance in 1945 was rooted in U.S. interest and access to profitable Saudi oil. Likewise, Saudi Arabia relied on the money provided by the U.S. oil concessions and the start of military support from the U.S.<sup>29</sup>

The meeting Roosevelt conducted with King Ibn Saud lead to an understanding between the two leaders on the brewing issue of the state of Israel. King Ibn Saud spoke out on the creation of Israel many times, both before and after its official creation. By one report made in 1943, King Ibn Saud tried to explain the current situation in Palestine to an American audience. He denied the Jewish claim to Palestine because they were conquered by Romans, who in turn were conquered by Muslims hundreds of years ago. According to King Ibn Saud, “Thus I hold the demands of the Jews upon this land [Palestine] an error; first because it constitutes an injustice against the Arabas, and the Moslems in general; and secondly because it causes dissensions and disturbances between the Moslems and their friends the Allies.”<sup>30</sup> The King continued to say that countries in Europe and the Americas should make room for Jewish refugees rather than push this burden on the Palestinians. He denounced the Jewish claim to Israel for the remainder of his reign. King Ibn Saud’s disapproval of the creation of Israel was and remains the standard disposition of Arabs throughout Southwest Asia. In King Ibn Saud’s

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<sup>27</sup> Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*, 17-21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-23, 45-48.

<sup>30</sup> "King Ibn Saud Declares Opposition to Jewish Claims on Palestine," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (New York), May 31, 1943, 10th ed., sec. 127, accessed May 11, 2019, <https://www.jta.org/1943/05/31/archive/king-ibn-saud-declares-opposition-to-jewish-claims-on-palestine>.

statement, he urged the “Allies” to prevent Jews native to Palestine from buying or taking property away from Arab Palestinians with his own assurance that Jews’ rights and safety would be guaranteed by the Arabs.<sup>31</sup> The influx of European Jews into Palestine was viewed similarly to colonialism. Therefore, King Ibn Saud urged the U.S. to cancel their support of a Jewish state in Palestine—he saw the U.S. as anti-imperial and expected it to support the Palestinians right to self-govern.

Each Presidential administration since Franklin D. Roosevelt has established a different policy and attitude towards Saudi Arabia and the problems plaguing the Middle East. This is common in American politics, but fast changing American politics were unfamiliar to the traditionalist royal family of Saud. The first source of tension in the U.S.-Saudi relationship was a change in administration policy when President Truman was elected. After Roosevelt’s meeting with King Ibn Saud, Roosevelt wrote a letter to King Ibn Saud regarding American policy towards the Israel-Palestine situation. Roosevelt promised King Ibn Saud “that no decision be taken with respect to the basic situation in that country without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews.”<sup>32</sup> According to Bronson, this letter represented to the Saudi government a promise made not just by Roosevelt, but by the American government.<sup>33</sup> When the U.S. supported Israeli independence under Truman, it was seen as a betrayal of Roosevelt’s promise by the Saudi government. Shifting U.S. policies from administration to administration continued to cause irritation between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia throughout the Cold War. President

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt to King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, April 5, 1945, in *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, page number, accessed April 28, 2019, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/decad161.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/decad161.asp).

<sup>33</sup> Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*, 42.

Roosevelt understood the importance of keeping Saudi Arabia a happy ally, but the Truman administration was swayed by the Zionist lobby.

The U.S.-Saudi relationship during the Truman administration had to contend with a growing Zionist movement in the U.S. and a weakening British presence in the Middle East. The support given to the creation of Israel by the Truman administration continues to influence Middle Eastern politics today, but also managed to give the U.S. a more secure foothold in the region. Saudi Arabia tried to dissuade the U.S. from giving in to Zionist pressures and instead force the Axis powers to grant land to the Jews.<sup>34</sup> The U.S. had far more Zionist lobbyists fighting for the creation of a Jewish state than Arab sympathizers that understood the creation of Israel meant war in the Middle East. Truman was more concerned with how his constituents viewed his stance on the “Palestine problem” than what ramifications the U.S. would have to face if Israel was created and backed by the U.S.<sup>35</sup>

Being concerned with the public opinion regarding the Palestine problem, the Truman administration made use of a survey done by researcher Hadley Cantril on public opinion of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine in March of 1945.<sup>36</sup> The researcher acknowledges the difficult scale of such a survey, noting that: “The subject is one where variations in the wording of questions would undoubtedly produce significant differences in percentages...”<sup>37</sup> This admission alone should give the reader significant pause when using the numbers presented in this survey as reliable figures regarding the controversial Palestine problem. Cantril found that

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<sup>34</sup> "King Ibn Saud Declares Opposition to Jewish Claims on Palestine," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*.

<sup>35</sup> Harry S. Truman, “Statement by the President Following the Adjournment of the Palestine Conference in London.” *The White House*, October 4, 1946. Accessed May 20, 2019.

[https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1763&st=227&st1=.](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1763&st=227&st1=)

<sup>36</sup> "Public Opinion Toward Creation of Jewish State in Palestine," Hadley Cantril to David Niles, April 4, 1945, in Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, accessed April 15, 2019, [https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael\\_handouts.pdf](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael_handouts.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*



roughly half of the total population had heard about the creation of a Jewish state (Yes 53% and No 47%). Forty-seven percent of those asked had no previous knowledge of the Palestine problem. This emphasizes the lack of information available to the American public about the Middle East and lack of understanding in regards to the Palestine problem.

The second question in the survey is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, half of those participating haven't had a chance to research the Palestine problem themselves and must rely on information given to them by the researcher to decide on the creation of a Jewish state. Secondly, the information provided by the researcher provides more context for the Jewish argument than the Arab one. On behalf of the Zionist argument Cantril mentions, "the best way to save the lives of many European Jews persecuted and made homeless by the Nazis...if the Jews have a national homeland they will be better able to help themselves."<sup>38</sup> When discussing the Arab argument, Cantril boils it down to there are more Arabs in Palestine and "open conflict would probably break out."<sup>39</sup> He doesn't mention the large migration of Jews to Palestine (100,000) that the U.S. pushing for, or the fear of a larger land grab by foreign peoples.<sup>40</sup> The information given to the participants of the survey is biased and the results show this clearly. Despite half of the participants not knowing about the Palestine problem (47 percent), 59 percent of participants were in favor of creating a Jewish state in Palestine.<sup>41</sup> Looking at only the participants that had an opinion as to the creation of a Jewish state, the position of participants were three to one in favor of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine.<sup>42</sup> The disparity between participants who had heard of the Palestine problem and those who were opposed to the creation of a Jewish state in

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Truman, "Statement by the President Following the Adjournment of the Palestine Conference in London."

<sup>41</sup> "Public Opinion Toward Creation of Jewish State in Palestine," Hadley Cantril to David Niles.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Palestine show the biased nature of the survey questions. The Truman administration pointed to surveys such as this to explain U.S. support for the creation of Israel, but the biased survey purposefully pushes the cause of the Jews as necessary and humane.

U.S. officials who had a deeper understanding of the Middle East urged the Truman administration to rethink supporting Zionist movements. A memo from Edward Stettinius Jr. (U.S. Secretary of State) to President Truman on April 18, 1945—less than a week after Truman took office as President—illustrates the urgency with which officials like Stettinius matched the Zionist lobby. In his memo, Stettinius explains to President Truman that “the question of Palestine is, however, a highly complex one and involves questions which go far beyond the plight of the Jews of Europe.”<sup>43</sup> Without mentioning specific Arab nations, Stettinius reminded President Truman of the importance of the alliance’s present in Southwest Asia: “we have interests in that area which are vital to the United States.”<sup>44</sup> Stettinius referenced the U.S.’s need for Saudi oil to convey the economic importance of the U.S.-Saudi alliance. The creation of a Jewish nation state in Palestine was considered a threat to majority Arab nations in Southwest Asia and Stettinius understood the Palestine problem went deeper than wanting to help the Jewish victims of the holocaust. Potential U.S. support for a Jewish nation in Palestine threatened Arab powers because they viewed the Jewish nation state as foreign invaders greedy for more land and power, but also because America used its new global influence to make decisions effecting Arabs half a world away.

The plight and hardships of the displaced European Jews were made readily apparent to the Truman administration by the Zionist lobby. The only solution offered by Zionists was to

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<sup>43</sup> "Personal and Confidential," Edward Stettinius, Jr. to President Harry S. Truman, April 18, 1945, in Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, accessed April 15, 2019, [https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael\\_handouts.pdf](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael_handouts.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

create a Jewish homeland where they could protect themselves—specifically in Palestine, the protested ancient homeland of the Jews. A report by Earl G Harrison (U.S. Representative on the Intergovernmental Commission on Refugees) on Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-War Europe explicitly states, “the only real solution, of the problem lies in the quick evacuation of all non-repatriable Jews in Germany and Austria, who wish it, to Palestine.”<sup>45</sup> It was not considered possible to reliably re-integrate hundreds of thousands of Jews back into their native homelands. An “Interim Report of American Jewish Conference Representatives in American Occupied Zone of Germany with Reference to Jewish Displaced Persons Centre” emphasized the poverty and torture already put upon the Jews in Austria and Germany.<sup>46</sup> In their report they claim, “these Jews do not desire to remain in Germany. They feel...that they can never be rehabilitated in a land whose every square inch they regard as being saturated with the blood of their families....The overwhelming majority have expressed their desire to go to Palestine...as soon as possible.”<sup>47</sup> Again, the Truman administration was flooded with reports and testimony from the Zionist movement that Palestine was the only option for the displaced Jews of Europe. These reports tended to overlook the majority Arab presence in Palestine and the tensions a Jewish nation in Palestine created.

Saudi Arabia was not as economically independent in 1945 as today. They relied heavily on financial assistance from both the U.S. and Britain. The oil concession between ARAMCO and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was necessary for the economy of the Kingdom, but it was not

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<sup>45</sup> "Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-War Europe," Earl G. Harrison to President Harry S. Truman, August/September 1945, in Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, accessed April 15, 2019, [https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael\\_handouts.pdf](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael_handouts.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> "Interim Report of American Jewish Conference Representatives in American Occupied Zone of Germany with Reference to Jewish Displaced Persons Centre," Alfred Fleishman, Samuel L. Sar, and Hans Lamm to Judge Simon Rifkind, December 13, 1945, in Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, page number, accessed April 15, 2019, [https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael\\_handouts.pdf](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael_handouts.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

lucrative enough to sustain the Kingdom alone. In a letter to President Truman in July of 1945, King Ibn Saud stresses his country's need for U.S. assistance.<sup>48</sup> Historian Geoff Simons focuses specifically on this aspect of the U.S.-Saudi relationship; he claims that the U.S.'s economic and military support of Saudi Arabia despite ideological differences is an indication of the U.S. using Saudi Arabia as a ward of American imperialism.<sup>49</sup> King Ibn Saud insistence in securing the financial aid started by President Roosevelt alongside the financial aid traditionally given to the Kingdom by Britain does support Simons argument that Saudi Arabia was being groomed by the U.S. as a client.<sup>50</sup>

The U.S. partnered with Britain to form the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry that was tasked with finding a solution to the Palestine problem. Two world powers deciding where to move hundreds of thousands of refugees with limited input from the effected parties (Jews and Arabs) is inherently imperial. The U.S. had no place in deciding how Palestine should be governed, but the Truman administration felt immense pressure to be a part of the solution to the Palestine conflict between Jew and Arab. Recommendation number three in a "Report to the United States Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom," made by the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry finds an excellent middle ground for all Abrahamic religions laying claim to Palestine.<sup>51</sup> This recommendation was never followed by the U.S. government, but it is important to note the U.S. was aware of possible compromises that were more favorable to the Arab majority. This recommendation states: "That Palestine shall be neither a Jewish state nor an Arab state...because it is a Holy Land, Palestine is not, and can

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<sup>48</sup> Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud to President Harry S. Truman, July 1945, in Office of the Historian, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d904>.

<sup>49</sup> Simons, *Saudi Arabia*, 185.

<sup>50</sup> Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud to President Harry S. Truman, July 1945.

<sup>51</sup> "Report to the United States Government and His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom," Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, April 20, 1946.

[https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael\\_handouts.pdf](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/dbq/docs/israel/TrumanIsrael_handouts.pdf)

never become, a land which any race or religion can justly claim it as its very own.”<sup>52</sup> This recommended action doesn’t go against Roosevelt’s promise to the King of Saudi Arabia by taking into account the need of Jews and Arabs (as well as Christians) to share this Holy Land. This solution to the Palestine problem was not followed in part because Britain and the Zionist lobby was pushing for a specifically *Jewish* nation in Palestine. Once Britain decided to abandon their protection of Palestine in the Middle East, the U.S. had to decide quickly whether they would support the creation of Israel or leave the Jewish community to fend for themselves in the Arab dominated Middle East.<sup>53</sup> The U.S.’s support of Israel without proper considerations made for Arab Palestinians cemented the U.S. as a imperial power in the Middle East interested in gaining clients similar to how Britain had throughout the early twentieth century.

From the start of the Truman administration President Truman was pressured by the Zionist lobby, officials in contact with Saudi Arabia, and King Ibn Saud himself to address the U.S.’s stance and agenda relating to the Palestine problem. On August 16, 1945 the White House released a statement saying that the Palestine problem was being handled by the British government with Jewish and Arab representatives to find the most cooperative solution to helping the displaced Jews of Europe.<sup>54</sup> This statement made by the Truman administration suggests that part of the solution to the Palestine problem will be the mass movement of Jewish refugees to Palestine. In order to suggest that Palestine take on Jewish refugees, the President moved to create special legislation that allowed a specific number of displaced European peoples, “including Jews,” to enter the U.S.<sup>55</sup> This move by Truman showed that the U.S. was

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Bronson, *Thicker than Oil*, 44.

<sup>54</sup> “White House Statement on Palestine and on the Problem of Displaced Persons in General.” *The White House*, August 16, 1946. Accessed May 20, 2019.

[https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1748&st=212&st1=.](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1748&st=212&st1=)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

willing to take their fair share of Jewish refugees, but still insisted that the solution to the Palestine problem must move Jews to Palestine.

Shortly after the release of the White House statement on August 16, 1946, President Truman released his own statement on October 4, 1946 to share his own opinion and goals regarding the Palestine problem.<sup>56</sup> Before this statement, President Truman and Roosevelt refused to commit to a particular course of action regarding the Palestine problem. The most troubling aspect of Truman's statement in regard to the U.S.-Saudi relationship is the U.S.'s insertion into deciding the solution to the Palestine problem. Additionally, the Arabs present in Palestine and King Ibn Saud's concerns were ignored in Truman's plan to help create a Jewish state "in an adequate area of Palestine."<sup>57</sup> The Truman administration's decision to discredit the creation of a bi-national state and dedicate itself to supporting the Jewish nation economically not only insulted the Saudi's inability to get financial assistance through Congress, but demonstrates the U.S.'s determination to insert their policies in the lucrative Middle East. Saudi Arabia's persistent show of disapproval for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine didn't matter as much as the public and Congressional opinion to the Truman administration—as Truman said in his statement release.<sup>58</sup> This is because the U.S. knew that Saudi Arabia was economically and militarily dependent on them, as Simons discusses in his claims of Saudi Arabia acting as the client of U.S. imperialism in Southwest Asia.

King Ibn Saud replied to the White House and President Truman's statement in a letter on October 15, 1946.<sup>59</sup> The King expressed his surprise at Truman's support for the creation of a

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<sup>56</sup> Truman, "Statement by the President Following the Adjournment of the Palestine Conference in London."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud to President Harry S. Truman, October 15, 1946, in Office of the Historian, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v07/d554>.

Jewish state because he claimed it went against the promises made to Saudi Arabia by both the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. He argued that the Jews wanted more land than just Palestine and would try and expand their territories, which later happened as a result of the Six Days War (June 5-June 10, 1967). Throughout the letter King Ibn Saud continually described the push to create a Jewish state in Palestine as “Zionist aggression” and appealed to the U.S.’s identity as freedom fighters:

I am certain that Your Excellency and the American people cannot support right, justice, and equity and fight for them in the rest of the world while denying them to the Arabs in their country, Palestine, which they have inherited from their ancestors from Ancient Times.<sup>60</sup>

King Ibn Saud made these claims before President Truman released a statement in support of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, but they did not help sway the President of changing his position. President Truman replied to the King’s concerns on October 18, 1946, “I do not consider that...my statements with regard to the solution of the problem of Palestine in any sense represent an action hostile to the Arab people.”<sup>61</sup> Saudi Arabia was an important asset for the U.S. in the Middle East, but the support for a Jewish state in Palestine was too much for Truman to ignore. Saudi Arabia was unable to retaliate against the U.S. in response to President Truman’s statement because they were financially and militarily reliant upon U.S. aid. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not able to survive or thrive without the help of the U.S. and the Truman administration used that knowledge to secure U.S. influence over two nations in the Middle East.

King Ibn Saud’s bad health and old age caught up with him in his final years and he was unable to rule efficiently. He had to rely on the help of his eldest sons to deal with matters of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> "Message to the King of Saudi Arabia Concerning Palestine," Harry S. Truman to King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, October 28, 1946, in Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, page number, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1787&st=&st1=>.

state until he died in 1953. The eldest two sons of King Ibn Saud, Prince Saud and Prince Faisal, did not hold the same partialness toward the U.S. as their father, but their struggle for power took up most of their attention.<sup>62</sup> The U.S.'s support and recognition of Israel alarmed and enraged the princes, but like their father they could do little to retaliate against the U.S. because Saudi Arabia relied on U.S. support. The Saud royal family had to come to terms with sharing the U.S. as a Western support with Israel.

In return for Saudi Arabia's support in the Middle East, the U.S. laid out their plans for support in a letter from President Truman to King Ibn Saud on October 31, 1950.<sup>63</sup> In the letter President Truman outlined three important factors in the U.S.-Saudi alliance. These factors would continue to hold the U.S. and Saudi Arabia together throughout the Cold War. First and foremost, President Truman speaks of the importance of fighting off the "forces of Communism" together. He goes on to praise the King's efforts to further develop Saudi Arabia and "improve the standards of living for your people." Finally, he promises that any threat made to Saudi Arabian borders would be of immediate concern to the U.S.<sup>64</sup> The Eisenhower administration followed the Truman administration in emphasizing these three points in the alliance between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.

During the Cold War, the U.S.'s interest in the Middle East expanded from oil to containment of the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia served as a strategic point for the U.S. to keep the region under Western influence. Political events throughout Southwest Asia were manipulated by the U.S. in order to keep communism from spreading—while simultaneously keeping the region under U.S. influence. Countries that allied with the Soviet Union, like Egypt, were a

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<sup>62</sup> Riedel, *Kings and Presidents*, 32-33.

<sup>63</sup> Harry S. Truman to King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, October 31, 1950, in Office of the Historian, page number, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v05/d658>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*



threat and the U.S. used Saudi Arabia and Israel to break these nationalistic countries of their Soviet ties—mainly through proxy wars, like Yemen. As the Cold War developed, the U.S. became more involved in the politics of the region and strengthened their ties with both Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In the decade after the Suez Crisis, Israel became of increasing value to the U.S. as Egypt, Syria, and Jordan remained outside of American control and Saudi Arabia appeared to lose stability under the son of King Ibn Saud, King Saud. Israel served the U.S. as a strong foothold in the Middle East. The Eisenhower administration's containment method used Israel to keep Arab nationalism from spreading during the Cold War.<sup>65</sup> According to Douglas Little, Eisenhower's containment policy and Kennedy's promises of American protection lead to the Johnson administration's closer relationship with Israel, against Saudi wishes.<sup>66</sup> The strong protection policy of Israel set by these three administrations were heavily influenced by the Soviet Union's looming presence in the form of the Arab nationalism movement. Despite the U.S. backing Nasser instead of Israel during the Suez Crisis, the U.S. was opposed to the nationalist states in the area because of their suspicious ties to the Soviets. Kennedy's decision to try and halt nuclear production in Israel by offering American protection in case of attack by Arab nations was motivated by a want to avoid a nuclear war between trigger-happy Israel and the Soviet backed Nasser.<sup>67</sup>

The U.S. backed Israel during the Six Days War and the U.S. was glad to see that Israel could defeat the liberation movements in the Middle East. Israel's show of power made them a more poignant ally in the region, but Israel's insistence upon keeping land conquered during the

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<sup>65</sup> Douglas Little, "The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957-68," (*International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 4, November 1993), 563.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 563-564.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 569.

conflict despite the U.S. pushing the U.N.'s proposal for peace through returning land put the U.S. at a disadvantage in the region. According to Little, the Israeli-U.S. partnership was not as influential in the region as was originally thought and the country gained access to nuclear weapons while anti-Western Arab groups and nationalist organizations grew closer to the Soviets in response to American-Israeli policy.<sup>68</sup> While American policy makers did not achieve their goals with Israel, the reasoning behind their actions were motivated by attempts to stop the liberation movements from converting to communism and removing American influence in the area. The U.S. isolated themselves not only from nationalist movements by backing Israel, but also from other Arab nations that wanted Palestine to be reinstated and protected from a foreign government.

As liberation movements were gaining momentum in the Middle East, the U.S. decided to take a hands-on approach to controlling policies in the region. A good example of the U.S. attempting to change politics in the region is Iran. The U.S. backed the 1953 coup to rid Iran of the elected Prime Minister and empowered the pro-Western monarchy. The U.S. doubted the solidarity of the Saudi monarchy during this time and Iran was more appealing as a Western supporter. The U.S. continued to back royalist movements in the Middle East, but especially in Iran and Saudi Arabia. The last Shah of Iran proved to be a great ally to the U.S. as he implemented his White Revolution to modernize his country. As the Shah's vision backfired, his people openly opposed his rule. When he was forced to flee his country because of riots and his failing health, the U.S. made the controversial decision to take the Shah into the U.S. as a show of support for other pro-American monarchies in the Middle East.<sup>69</sup> The decision to shield the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 564, 577-580.

<sup>69</sup> Nate Penn, "444 Days in the Dark: An Oral History of the Iran Hostage Crisis," *GQ*, November 3, 2009, accessed June 5, 2018, <https://www.gq.com/story/iran-hostage-crisis-tehran-embassy-oral-history>.

Shah from his people resulted in a stronger anti-American sentiment as it seemed to cement the idea that the Shah was a pawn of the West. The U.S. government knew the U.S. embassy was vulnerable to attack and took the risk of accepting the Shah into the U.S. anyway. The students who took Embassy staff hostage admitted they wouldn't have done anything if the U.S. had not interfered.<sup>70</sup> The blatant use of U.S. power to change the heads of state in order to undermine unfavorable policies in the Middle East caused instability and riots in the region. This trend is seen in Egypt, Syria, and Afghanistan. The U.S. feared that liberation movements in the Middle East would turn communist and threaten control over the region and thus interfered to stop the alliance of guerilla groups with the Soviet Union.

A relationship based off similar interests and goals is best seen in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. During the Cold War, the two countries worked well against the Arab nationalists that threatened the Saud claim to leadership in the Arab world. The other big threat to the U.S. and Saudi Arabia was the encroaching Soviet Union through Arab nationalism. The U.S. was so focused on keeping control of the oil rich states of the Middle East that they opposed liberation movements and Arab nationalism due to a fear of communism in favor of political Islamic groups that would later turn against the U.S. once the Soviet Union was dealt with. The actions taken by the U.S. during the Cold War has shaped the Middle East into an unstable region that the U.S. still has issues with to present day. Relationship the U.S. made during the Cold War, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, are still important to American foreign policy, but American support for political Islam has dissipated since the Soviet Union's end. U.S. policy in the Middle East was strongly affected by Soviet intervention within the area and fear of the spread of communism. This fear lead the U.S. to support suspect groups in Southwest Asia. Issues

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2-3, 8-10.

currently being faced by the U.S. in the Middle East can be traced back to decisions made during the Cold War.

The Roosevelt administration succeeded in creating a strong bond between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia by gaining the trust of King Ibn Saud. After Roosevelt's death, the Truman administration strengthened ties with Saudi Arabia by facilitating the creation of the Dhahran air base and increasing the revenue received by the Saudi government for exporting oil. President Truman's support of the creation of Israel in Palestine tested the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, but the U.S. supported the Kingdom so much it was impossible for Saudi Arabia fully support Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in fighting against Israel. The Kingdom needed U.S. economic and military support to maintain its government. Without foreign aid the Kingdom could not sustain itself.

The U.S. increased their influence in Southwest Asia from 1945-1953. As Britain retreated from the Middle East in the late 1940s the U.S. took up their support of Israel. The Truman administration increased its support of Saudi Arabia during this time which enabled the U.S. to create a permanent ally in the region. Despite several appeals from King Ibn Saud to allow the Arabs to govern Palestine independently, the Truman administration was swayed by the Zionist lobby into supporting the creation of Israel. With Israel's independence in 1948 the U.S. had two allies in the Middle East relying on their aid. This allowed the U.S. to become the biggest influential power in Southwest Asia. The U.S.'s influence and power in the Middle East stem from its domination of Saudi Arabia and Israel during the Truman administration.

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