

The Link

*Published by Americans for
Middle East Understanding, Inc.*

Volume 38, Issue 2

Link Archives: www.ameu.org

April-May 2005

The Day FDR Met Saudi Arabia's Ibn Saud

By Thomas W. Lippman



*R to L: President Franklin D. Roosevelt,
King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, Col. William A.
Eddy, and (far left) Admiral William D. Leahy.*

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The Day FDR Met Saudi Arabia's Ibn Saud

Everyone who watched was mesmerized by the spectacle, at once majestic and bizarre. Over the waters of Egypt's Great Bitter Lake, an American destroyer, the USS *Murphy*, steamed toward a rendezvous with history. On a deck covered with colorful carpets and shaded by an enormous tent of brown canvas, a large black-bearded man in Arab robes, his headdress bound with golden cords, was seated on a gilded throne. Around him stood an entourage of fierce-looking, dark-skinned barefoot men in similar attire, each with a sword or dagger bound to his waist by a gold-encrusted belt. On the *Murphy's* fantail, sheep grazed in a makeshift corral. It was, one American witness said, "a spectacle out of the ancient past on the deck of a modern man-of-war."

Awaiting the arrival of this exotic delegation aboard another American warship, the cruiser USS *Quincy*, were three admirals, several high-ranking U.S. diplomats and the president of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt. As they watched in fascination, the man in the throne was hoisted aloft in a bosun's chair and transferred from the *Murphy* to the *Quincy*, where he shuffled forward and grasped the president's hand in a firm grip. Thus began the improbable meeting between Roosevelt and the desert potentate with whom of all the world's leaders he had the least in common, King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia. In five intense hours they would bind together the destinies of their two countries and shape the course of events in the Middle East for decades to come.

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It was February 14, 1945. The end of World War II was finally in sight as Allied forces advanced on Berlin and fought their way toward the Japanese heartland. With victory assured, Roosevelt was looking toward the future and envisioning new security and economic arrangements for the nation he had led through twelve tumultuous years. He ventured to Yalta, in the Soviet Crimea, to negotiate the post-war world order and the creation of the United Nations with Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Britain and the Soviet leader Josef Stalin. Before leaving Washington, he arranged to stop in Egypt after the Yalta conference for brief meetings with three leaders whose role in the war was marginal but whose place in the future might be significant: King Farouk of Egypt, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and King Abdul Aziz, then commonly known as Ibn Saud.

That Roosevelt included Abdul Aziz on his list was a dramatic demonstration of how far and how rapidly American strategic thinking about the Gulf region had evolved during the war. Before 1942, the U.S. government had no official interest in Saudi Arabia, even though an American oil company had struck oil there in 1938 and had created a small community of American geologists, drillers and engineers to deliver the oil to global markets. No American official of higher rank than minister in the diplomatic service had ever before encountered the bedouin monarch, and the king, in all his 64 years, had ventured no further out of the Arabian peninsula than Basra, in southern Iraq. His domain was impoverished, isolated and backward; its levels of education, public health and mechanization were among the lowest in the world.

In strategic terms, Saudi Arabia, though never colonized, was in the British sphere of influence; the British were entrenched in Iraq, Bahrain, Oman and the trucional states on the Arab side of the gulf, as well as in Egypt and Palestine. The U.S. official presence was minimal in the entire Arab world, and so was official U.S. interest. In 1941, Roosevelt rejected State Department advice to provide financial assistance to Saudi Arabia under the Lend-Lease program with the comment, "This is a little far afield for us!" The war changed all that almost overnight.

Roosevelt's military and economic advisers,

alarmed by the rate at which the war was consuming U.S. domestic petroleum, began to see the potential long-term value of the Saudi fields, the only ones in the Middle East where an American company held exclusive production rights. At the same time the U.S. Armed Forces, fighting a global war, wanted an air base someplace in the Middle East that was not under British or French control. And Roosevelt, looking past the combat, nursed the hope that Abdul Aziz, who despite his lack of formal education and his country's backwardness was a hero in the Arab world, would somehow be helpful in solving a daunting problem that the president knew was coming: the future of Palestine and the resettlement of Europe's surviving Jews. The Nazi death camp at Auschwitz had been liberated a month before the president left Washington en route to Yalta, and the full scope of the Holocaust was being revealed to the world. The Jews had a claim on the world's conscience, and on Roosevelt's.

The United States established diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia in 1939, but no American diplomat resided in the kingdom; Saudi Arabia was the responsibility of the U.S. minister to Egypt, who lived in Cairo and rarely ventured into the Arabian peninsula. The Saudi Arabian government, which consisted of the king and handful of his favorite sons and trusted advisers, had no representative in Washington; when Abdul Aziz wanted to conduct business with the United States, he did so through the oil company, Standard Oil Company of California, known in Saudi Arabia as CASOC. (In 1944 the name was changed to Arabian American Oil Co., or Aramco.)

Only in April 1942 did the State Department post its first resident envoy to Jeddah, a career officer named James Moose. At that time Saudi Arabia was paradoxically more isolated and poverty-stricken than ever because the outbreak of the war had shut off its oil exports only six months after they began in 1939, and had mostly halted the Mecca pilgrimage traffic that still represented the Kingdom's principal source of revenue. As the war dragged on, Saudi Arabia was experiencing serious food shortages, and CASOC increasingly urged Washington to provide assistance lest the king revoke the concession and give it to the British, who were providing him with

financial assistance. British interests had opposed American oil companies' entry into Iran, Kuwait, Iraq, and Bahrain; the British lost out on Saudi Arabia when King Abdul Aziz chose the American firm, but the king could reverse himself at any time. Busy as he was with more urgent issues, Roosevelt was still flexible and perceptive enough to include Saudi Arabia in his long-term thinking.

The entreaties of the oil company paid off in February 1943. At the urging of Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior and wartime oil administrator, Roosevelt declared Saudi Arabia vital to the defense of the United States and therefore eligible for financial aid. As the British journalist David Holden wrote in his history of Saudi Arabia, "The great American take-over had begun."

Official contacts between the United States and Saudi Arabia now multiplied quickly, at steadily higher levels. In July, Roosevelt sent Lt. Col. Harold B. Hoskins, an Arabic-speaking intelligence agent, to ask the king if he would meet with Chaim Weizmann or other Zionist leaders to discuss the plight of the Jews and the future of Palestine. Hoskins was well received personally but got nowhere with the king, a committed anti-Zionist, who told him he would not conduct such talks himself nor authorize others to do so. The issue, however, could not be brushed aside or wished away. The stranded, traumatized Jewish survivors in Europe were clamoring for resettlement; their plight had reinforced the determination of Zionists in the United States to create a Jewish state in Palestine.

In August, Secretary of State Cordell Hull instructed Moose to ask the king for permission for the United States to open a consulate in Dhahran, the little American settlement on the oil fields along the Gulf Coast. Permission was granted the following year. At about the same time, the U.S. mission in Jeddah was upgraded to legation and Moose was replaced by a higher-ranking official, a colorful U.S. Marine war hero named William A. Eddy. Col. Eddy, who wore his Marine Corps uniform all the time he was the State Department's representative in Saudi Arabia, was to be a crucial figure in bringing the president and king together for a successful encounter.

In September 1943, two of Abdul Aziz's sons,

Princes Faisal and Khalid — both future kings — were invited to Washington and were well-treated. Vice President Harry Truman put on a dinner for them at the White House. They stayed at Blair House, the official government guest house, and were provided with a special train to carry them on a sightseeing trip to the West Coast. Upon their return home, they reported favorably to their father, and also informed him that they had been told President Roosevelt enjoyed collecting stamps. That gave the king an opening to approach the president directly. He sent the president a set of Saudi Arabian stamps, then quite rare in the West.

On February 10, 1944, Roosevelt sent the king a letter thanking him for the stamps. He expressed regret that he had been unable to meet the king during a recent trip to Cairo and Tehran — a trip on which he flew over part of Saudi Arabia and conceived the idea of bringing irrigation and agriculture to the region's vast deserts — and expressed the hope of meeting Abdul Aziz on some future journey. "There are many things I want to talk to you about," the president said.

The king took this as a commitment from the president to visit, and began asking Moose when he could expect Roosevelt's arrival. The president's journey to Yalta was to provide the opportunity. Moose, by then back in Washington, claimed credit for persuading Roosevelt to meet Abdul Aziz on the Yalta journey; the president's cousin, Archie Roosevelt, wrote in his memoirs that Moose had "buttonholed everyone in State concerned with the president's trip" and when the professional diplomats were not responsive "he got someone to send a memo to the White House, and when it reached the president, he jumped at the chance for this exotic encounter." From the historical record, however, it seems that Roosevelt did not need much persuasion. He was genuinely interested in Saudi Arabia.

On February 3, 1945, acting secretary of state Joseph C. Grew cabled Eddy and the U.S. representatives in Cairo and Addis Ababa that the president wanted to see the three leaders "on board a United States man of war at Ismailia about February 10" — that is, only a week or so later. Grew's message sent off a frantic scramble to make arrangements, complicated by the need to maintain secrecy about the

president's itinerary.

The president would travel to the Mediterranean aboard the *Quincy*, fly from Malta to the Crimea for his historic meeting with Churchill and Stalin, then reboard the *Quincy* in Egyptian waters for his encounters with Farouk, Haile Selassie and Abdul Aziz. The Navy's Destroyer Squadron 17, which had been on convoy duty in the Atlantic, was detached to escort the *Quincy*. That was the easy part of the arrangements. The hard part was delivering King Abdul Aziz and his entourage, who knew no way of life other than their own and took for granted that their habits, diets and religious practices would travel with them. Roosevelt was a wealthy, educated patrician with a sophisticated knowledge of the world; Abdul Aziz was a semi-literate desert potentate whose people knew nothing of plumbing or electricity. Yet the Saudis assumed—rightly, as it turned out—that the two leaders would meet on equal terms; Abdul Aziz would accept nothing less.

The story of how this amazing feat of diplomacy and cultural accommodation was accomplished is told principally in the accounts of three participants: a brief narrative by Eddy, "F.D.R Meets ibn Saud," published in 1954; "Mission to Mecca: The Cruise of the *Murphy*," a 1976 magazine article by U.S. Navy Captain John S. Keating, commander of Destroyer Squadron 17, who was aboard the destroyer; and "White House Sailor," a memoir by William M. Rigdon, who was Roosevelt's naval aide at the time. The key figure in the preparations was Eddy, who had been born in Lebanon and was fluent in Arabic. Having won the king's confidence and friendship during his first months as U.S. minister in Jeddah, Eddy was the cultural mediator between the two sides.

The plan called for the king and his advisers to travel overland from Riyadh to Jeddah and board the *Murphy* for the voyage up the Red Sea to Egypt. Because of wartime security restrictions, the entire plan was kept secret from Jeddah's small diplomatic corps and from the Arabian populace. Eddy accepted social invitations knowing he would not be attending the events; the king put out the word that his caravan was heading for Mecca. When instead he boarded the *Murphy* and sailed away, there was consternation and grief among the people, who feared

he had abdicated or been kidnapped.

Knowing nothing about the king, his country or his habits, Keating and the *Murphy's* skipper, Commander Bernard A. Smith were understandably nervous about protocol and worried about how their crew would behave; because of the secrecy requirements, they had not been told that Eddy would accompany the Arab party and navigate these issues for them. Their only information came from an encyclopedia, which informed them that the king had many wives and scores of children, and that the consumption of alcohol and tobacco were forbidden in his presence. Their only chart of the Jeddah harbor dated to 1834; no U.S. Navy ship had ever put in there. The Americans knew that Islam prohibited the consumption of pork and that the king liked to eat lamb, but otherwise they knew nothing of his dietary preferences.

The Saudis said the traveling party would consist of 200 people, including some of the king's wives. Smith said the most the *Murphy* could accommodate was 10. Eddy negotiated the number down to 20, although when the king and his party arrived at the pier there were 48, including the king's brother Abdullah; two of his sons, Mohammed and Mansour; his wily finance minister, Abdullah Suleiman, who had negotiated the oil concession agreement with Standard Oil a decade earlier; and the royal astrologer. It also fell to Eddy to explain to the king's advisers why no women could make the voyage: there was no place aboard the *Murphy* where they could be sequestered, and they would be exposed to prying male eyes as they negotiated the gangways.

Abdul Aziz spurned the cabin designated as his quarters aboard the *Murphy*; he and his 47 companions insisted on sleeping outdoors, bedding down where they could around the deck. Because of the king's foot and leg ailments, he could not walk easily on steel, so his retainers spread carpets. The Arabs rejected the sturdy chairs from the *Murphy's* wardroom as inadequate; aboard came the king's high-backed gilt throne, in which the king sat facing the bow at all times except the hours of prayer, when he and his party bowed toward Mecca — the location of which was plotted for them by the ship's navigators. Most of the Arabs had never before seen a motorized vessel or sailed outside coastal waters, and became

seasick, but not the king.

Abdul Aziz brought with him a flock of sheep, which he expected would be slaughtered en route for his meals — and which he insisted the American sailors share as his guests. Smith balked at the livestock, but the Arabs said they would not eat the frozen meat of the *Murphy's* stores. Eddy negotiated another compromise in which 10 sheep were taken aboard and penned at the fantail, and he told the king that Navy regulations prohibited the *Murphy's* crew from eating any food other than Navy rations. Surely the king would not want these fine young Americans confined to the brig over such an issue?

The king accepted that argument, but other Navy regulations were thrown overboard to accommodate the Arabs. The Saudis built charcoal fires to brew coffee, including one next to an open ammunition storage room, to the Americans' consternation. When the king asked for names of all crew members, Eddy knew he was preparing to give gifts to all of them, and he persuaded Keating and Smith to accept this breach of the rules rather than offend the king by refusing. "Explain to your superiors that it couldn't be helped," Eddy said.

But if any Americans were inclined to ridicule the Arabs or take the king lightly, they were overpowered by his commanding presence and by the determination of Eddy and Keating to deliver him to his meeting with Roosevelt in a positive frame of mind. When Abdul Aziz boarded the *Murphy*, Keating wrote, "The immediate impression was one of great majesty and dignity. One sensed the presence of extreme power."

The voyage of the *Murphy* lasted two nights and one full day, during which Abdul Aziz saw his country's Red Sea coastline for the first time. "The voyage was delightful," Eddy wrote later. "The weather for the most part was fine. The sailors were much more impressed and astonished by the Arabs and their ways than the Arabs were by life on the U.S. destroyer. Neither group had seen anything like their opposites before, but the difference is that any such violent break with tradition is news on board a U.S. destroyer; whereas wonders and improbable events are easily accepted by the Arab whether they occur in the Arabian Nights or in real life. The Arab is by nature a fatalist and accepts what comes as a matter

of course and a gift from Allah."

The Americans entertained the king with displays of naval gunnery and navigational instruments, in which he displayed a lively interest. The king ate his first apple and discovered the delights of apple pie à la mode. Abdul Aziz saw his first motion picture, a documentary about operations aboard an aircraft carrier. According to Eddy he enjoyed it, but said he was disinclined to allow movies in his country as they would give the people "an appetite for entertainment which might distract them from their religious duties." His fears on this point would have been confirmed had he been aware of what was happening below decks, where others in the Arab party were delightedly watching a bawdy comedy starring Lucille Ball.

Eddy was the only person on board who spoke both languages. And yet, he wrote, "The Arabs and sailors fraternized without words with a success and friendliness which was really astonishing. The sailors showed the Arabs how they did their jobs and even permitted the Arabs to help them; in return the Arabs would permit the sailors to examine their garb and their daggers, and demonstrate by gestures how they are made and for what purposes. The Arabs were particularly puzzled by the Negro mess-boys on board who, they assumed, must be Arabs and to whom they insisted on speaking Arabic since the only Negroes whom they had ever known were those who had been brought to Arabia as slaves many years ago."

With these cultural shoals successfully navigated, the king was delivered safely to the *Quincy*, where the president was waiting for him. According to Rigdon, who saw the president's briefing book, Roosevelt had been given this information about his guest: "The king's three admitted delights in life are said to be women, prayer, and perfume...His Majesty has much personal charm and great force of character. His rise to power established order in a country having a tradition of lawlessness, and was partly based on astute policy and on well-publicized displays of generosity and severity according to the occasion... Any relaxation of his steadfast opposition to Zionist aims in Palestine would violate his principles... According to Arab and Moslem custom, the women of his family are strictly secluded and, of

course, should not be mentioned... To a visitor of ministerial rank, he often makes a facetious offer of an Arab wife, in addition to any wife the visitor may already have."

Once the king was safely aboard the *Quincy*, he and Roosevelt almost immediately struck a personal rapport by focusing on what they had in common rather than on their obvious differences. As recounted by Eddy, who was the interpreter for both sides, "the king spoke of being the 'twin' brother of the President, in years, in responsibility as Chief of State, and in physical disability. The President said, 'but you are fortunate to still have the use of your legs to take you wherever you choose to go.' The king replied, 'It is you, Mr. President, who are fortunate. My legs grow feebler every year; with your more reliable wheel-chair you are assured that you will arrive.' The President then said, 'I have two of these chairs, which are also twins. Would you accept one as a personal gift from me?' The king said, 'Gratefully. I shall use it daily and always recall affectionately the giver, my great and good friend.'"

The president also bestowed upon the king another gift that would have great long-term implications for the relationship between the two countries: A DC-3 passenger airplane. That aircraft, specially outfitted with a rotating throne that allowed the king always to face Mecca while airborne, stimulated the king's interest in air travel and was later the first plane in the fleet of what would become—after decades of aviation and maintenance training by Americans from Trans World Airlines—the modern Saudi Arabian Airlines.

After this exchange of pleasantries, the king joined the president for lunch. Following Rigdon's direction, the mess stewards served grapefruit, curried lamb, rice and whatever they could scrounge up as condiments — eggs, coconut, chutney, almonds, raisins, green peppers, tomatoes, olives, and pickles. After some hesitation, "His Majesty fell to, taking several servings and eating with visible pleasure," Rigdon recalled.

When it was time for coffee, the king asked Roosevelt if his ceremonial coffee server could do the honors, to which request the president of course assented. The result was Roosevelt's first taste of the cardamom-scented brew served in tiny cups that is

ubiquitous in the Arabian peninsula. He took two cups, with apparent enjoyment; only several days later did he tell the crew that he found it "godawful."

So much did King Abdul Aziz enjoy his repast that he stunned his host with an unexpected request: he wanted the cook for himself. "He said the meal was the first he had eaten in a long time that was not followed by digestive disturbance and he would like, if the President would be so generous, to have the cook as a gift," Rigdon wrote in "White House Sailor." The king meant this as a compliment, but there was consternation among the Americans when Eddy translated his request.

"FDR, always a skillful talker in a jam, explained that the cook on the *Quincy* was under obligation to serve a certain period of time and that the contract with the Navy, or something of the kind, could not be broken," Rigdon recalled. "He was complimented that His Majesty was pleased with the food and regretted so much that he could not grant his request. Perhaps His Majesty would allow us to train one of his cooks?"

After this exchange, the president and the king retired for a substantive conversation. That Roosevelt was able to engage the king in a lively back and forth exchange that went on for nearly four hours was a tribute to his indefatigable will, because he was ill and exhausted. The arduous trip to Yalta and the equally arduous negotiations there had fatally undermined his already fragile health, and by the time he sat down with Abdul Aziz he was only two months from death.

"Throughout this meeting," Eddy observed, "President Roosevelt was in top form as a charming host [and] witty conversationalist, with the spark and light in his eyes and that gracious smile which always won people over to him whenever he talked with them as a friend. However, every now and then I could catch him off guard and see his face in repose. It was ashen in color; the lines were deep; the eyes would fade in helpless fatigue. He was living on his nerve."

The record of what the two leaders said is remarkably skimpy, considering the importance of the event. The meeting attracted little notice in the American press at the time, Roosevelt described it

only briefly in his comments to reporters afterward, and the president's report to Congress about the Yalta conference mentioned his post-Yalta meetings only in passing. The lack of interest in the press is not surprising, considering what was happening in the world at the time. Measured against the climactic campaigns of the war in Europe and the Pacific, the president's brief encounter with an obscure potentate from a little-known desert country did not appear to be a compelling story. Moreover, the participants decided that the delicate issues under discussion did not lend themselves to public ventilation, and they kept silent about the details. The U.S. government's official report on the meeting, published in the Department of State Bulletin of February 25, 1945, said only this: "The discussions were in line with the President's desire that the heads of governments throughout the world should get together whenever possible to talk as friends and exchange views in order better to understand the problems of one another." It did not say what views were exchanged.

Various American officials in Roosevelt's traveling party picked up bits and pieces of the conversation afterward, but most of what is known about it comes from two sources: the brief memoir by Eddy, who as interpreter for both sides was the only American other than the president who heard it all, and an official joint memorandum prepared at the time by Eddy and Yusuf Yasin, a Syrian advisor to the king, which became known to the public only when it was declassified 25 years later.

The president led the discussion; as his guest, Abdul Aziz initiated no topics of conversation, waiting to see what Roosevelt wished to discuss and then responding. Eddy's account emphasizes that the king asked for no economic assistance and the subject was not discussed, even though at the time his country was suffering widespread hardship and even famine because the war had cut off its sources of revenue.

Roosevelt came straight to the most urgent point: the plight of the Jews and the future of Palestine, where it was already apparent that the governing mandate bestowed upon Britain by the League of Nations twenty years earlier would come to an end after the war.

"The President asked His Majesty for his advice regarding the problem of Jewish refugees driven

from their homes in Europe," according to the joint memorandum. "His majesty replied that in his opinion the Jews should return to live in the lands from which they were driven. The Jews whose homes were completely destroyed and who have no chance of livelihood in their homelands should be given living space in the Axis countries which oppressed them."

Roosevelt said Jews were reluctant to go back to Germany and nurtured a "sentimental" desire to go to Palestine. But the king brushed aside the argument that Europe's surviving Jews might be fearful of returning to their homes: Surely the allies were going to crush the Nazis, break them to the point where they would never again pose a threat, the king said — otherwise, what was the point of the war?

"Make the enemy and the oppressor pay; that is how we Arabs wage war," he said, according to Eddy's narrative. "Amends should be made by the criminal, not by the innocent bystander. What injury have Arabs done to the Jews of Europe? It is the 'Christian' Germans who stole their homes and lives. Let the Germans pay."

The king—from whose country Jews had been expunged during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad twelve centuries earlier—said that "the Arabs and the Jews could never cooperate, neither in Palestine nor in any other country. His majesty called attention to the increasing threat to the existence of the Arabs and the crisis which has resulted from continued Jewish immigration and the purchase of land by the Jews. His Majesty further stated that the Arabs would choose to die rather than yield their land to the Jews." The public record contains no indication that the king saw any contradiction between his belief that the Arabs of Palestine would rather die than give up their land and the fact that some of those same Arabs were selling their lands to Jewish buyers.

Charles E. Bohlen, a prominent American diplomat who was a member of Roosevelt's official party, wrote in his memoirs that the king also raised another point about Palestine that is not mentioned in Eddy's account or the joint memorandum. "Ibn Saud gave a long dissertation on the basic attitude of Arabs toward the Jews," Bohlen wrote in "Witness to History." "He denied that there had ever been any

conflict between the two branches of the Semitic race in the Middle East. What changed the whole picture was the immigration from Eastern Europe of people who were technically and culturally on a higher level than the Arabs. As a result, King Ibn Saud said, the Arabs had greater difficulty in surviving economically. The fact that these energetic Europeans were Jewish was not the cause of the trouble, he said; it was their superior skills and culture."

Other American officials traveling with Roosevelt said in their various memoirs that the President seemed at first not to understand the rigidity of the king's opposition to further Jewish migration into Palestine, and brought up the matter several more times, eliciting the same negative response. The President then raised an idea he said he had heard from Churchill — resettling the Jews in Libya, which was far larger than Palestine and thinly populated. Abdul Aziz rejected this notion as well, saying it would be unfair to the Muslims of North Africa.

"His Majesty stated that the hope of the Arabs is based upon the word of honor of the Allies and upon the well-known love of justice of the United States," the joint statement reported, "and upon the expectation the United States will support them."

In response to that, Roosevelt gave the king the famous promise that would become the cornerstone of U.S. policy on Palestine for the next two years, until his successor, Harry S Truman, repudiated it by endorsing the partition of Palestine by the United Nations: "The President replied that he wished to assure His Majesty that he would do nothing to assist the Jews against the Arabs and would make no move hostile to the Arab people" and that his government "would make no change in its basic policy in Palestine without full and prior consultation with both Jews and Arabs."

On April 5, just a week before his death, Roosevelt restated that promise in writing. He sent a letter to the king under the salutation "Great and Good Friend" reaffirming the "full consultation" formula and his promise that he "would take no action, in my capacity as Chief of the Executive Branch of this Government, which might prove hostile to the Arab people."

The king was gratified by Roosevelt's promise,

but he also made too much of it. As Eddy noted at the time, Abdul Aziz took it as a commitment of the United States, rather than as a personal pledge from its current leader. "In the conversation the king never seemed to distinguish between F.D.R. as a person and as President of the U.S.A.," Eddy noted. "To an absolute as well as a benevolent monarch, the Chief and the State are the same." The king's failure to understand this distinction accounted for his outrage and disappointment when Truman endorsed the postwar partition of Palestine and recognized the new Jewish state there.

Upon his return to Washington, Roosevelt would tell Congress that "On the problem of Arabia, I learned more about that whole problem—the Moslem problem, the Jewish problem—by talking with Ibn Saud for five minutes than I could have learned in the exchange of two or three dozen letters," but he did not specify exactly what it was he had learned. As one of his senior aides observed sarcastically, "The only thing he learned was what everyone already knew —that the Arabs didn't want any more Jews in Palestine."

After giving the king his "full consultation" pledge, Roosevelt broached the idea of an Arab mission to Britain and the United States to press the argument against Zionist aspirations because "many people in America and England are misinformed." The king replied that such a mission might be useful but "more important to him was what the President had just told him concerning his own policy toward the Arab people."

The conversation then turned to Syria and Lebanon, where the Arabs feared a liberated France would seek to reassert control after the war. Abdul Aziz asked what the U.S. position would be "in the event that France should continue to press intolerable demands upon Syria and the Lebanon." Roosevelt replied that France had given him written guarantees that Syria and Lebanon would be granted independence and he intended to hold the French to their promise. "In the event that France should thwart the independence of Syria and the Lebanon," he told the king, "the United States Government would give to Syria and the Lebanon all possible support short of the use of force."

Then the president turned the conversation in

another direction entirely. He raised the possibility that Saudi Arabia could develop agriculturally with irrigation and proper farming techniques—the vision that had inspired his interest in the country during his flight over it after the Tehran summit conference in 1943.

The idea was not so far-fetched as it might have sounded at the time. An American team led by the engineer Karl Twitchell had identified areas of the country where irrigation was feasible, and a team dispatched by Aramco was growing useful crops on the royal experimental farm in al-Kharj, where its pumps were pulling up large quantities of water from underground.

"The President spoke of his great interest in farming, stating that he himself was a farmer," according to the joint memorandum. "He emphasized the need for developing water resources, to increase the land under cultivation as well as to turn the wheels which do the country's work. He expressed special interest in irrigation, tree planting and water power which he hoped would be developed after the war in many countries, including the Arab lands. Stating that he liked Arabs, he reminded His Majesty that to increase land under cultivation would decrease the desert and provide living for a larger population of Arabs."

"I am too old to be a farmer," the king replied. "I would be much interested to try it, if I wasn't too old to take it up." He thanked the president for his interest, but added that "He himself could not engage with any enthusiasm for the development of his country's agriculture and public works if this prosperity would be inherited by the Jews." This was little short of paranoia—there were no Jews in Saudi Arabia and none were proposing to go there. There is no record of what Roosevelt said in response, if anything.

It is evident from the accounts of participants and witnesses to this meeting that the American president and the Arabian king, as different as two men could be in language, religion, education and knowledge of the world, liked and admired each other and struck up a personal rapport. Their mutual esteem delivered to Roosevelt one of the most important and least expected outcomes of their encoun-

ter: a tactical and strategic victory over Churchill, who hoped to keep Saudi Arabia within Britain's sphere of influence after the war, despite the king's decision a decade earlier to give the oil exploration contract to an American firm.

Churchill was surprised to learn at Yalta that Roosevelt planned to meet with Abdul Aziz after that conference, and in Eddy's words "burned up the wires to his diplomats" to set up a similar encounter for himself. He got his meeting, and arranged for the king to return to Saudi Arabia aboard a British ship rather than an American one, but the results were counterproductive because the king found Churchill arrogant and disrespectful, on matters great and small.

Whereas Roosevelt had respected the king's wishes and refrained from smoking in his presence, Churchill did the opposite. As he wrote in his memoirs, "If it was the religion of His Majesty to deprive himself of smoking and alcohol I must point out that my rule of life prescribed as an absolutely sacred rite smoking cigars and also drinking alcohol before, after, and if need be during all meals and in the intervals between them." He puffed cigar smoke in the king's face.

On his homeward voyage, the king found the British Navy's food unpalatable and its officers dull; they did not match the Americans' entertaining gunnery displays. And while he was delighted with Roosevelt's gift airplane, he was displeased by the Rolls-Royce automobile he received from Churchill because the steering wheel was on the right. That would have required the king to ride on the driver's left, a position of dishonor, and he never used the car.

Upon Eddy's return to Jeddah, the king summoned him to a private meeting at which, Eddy reported to the State Department, he praised Roosevelt and disparaged Churchill. "The contrast between the President and Mr. Churchill is very great," the king said. "Mr. Churchill speaks deviously, evades understanding [and] changes the subject to avoid commitment, forcing me repeatedly to bring him back to the point. The President seeks understanding in conversations; his effort is to make the two minds meet, to dispel darkness and shed light upon this issue." And

the king concluded: "I have never met the equal of the President in character, wisdom, and gentility."

In his report to the State Department about this conversation, Eddy added an important detail about the king's meeting with Roosevelt that was omitted from the joint memorandum. The king asked Roosevelt what he should say to Britons who argued that his country's future lay with them, not with the United States, because America's interest in the region was transitory and would dissipate after the war. He said the British told him they would be responsible for security and international communications in the region and "based on the strength of this argument they seek a priority for Britain in Saudi Arabia. What am I to believe?"

The British had a point; at the time their influence prevailed throughout the Arabian Gulf region, but Roosevelt's vision saw beyond this residual colonialism. He told the king that his "plans for the post-war world envisage a decline of spheres of influence in favor of the Open Door; that the United States hopes the door of Saudi Arabia will be open for her and for other nations, with no monopoly by anyone; for only by free exchange of goods, services and opportunities can prosperity circulate to the advantage of free peoples." That was much more to the king's liking than the British line, for his greatest fear as he opened his country to the foreign technical help he needed was encroachment on Saudi sovereignty and he was suspicious of British designs.

In his audience with Eddy back in Jeddah the following week, the king again brought up his irritation with Churchill, who he said had tried to bully him about Palestine. In his report to Washington, Eddy gave this paraphrase of the king's remarks:

"Mr. Churchill opened the subject confidently wielding the big stick. Great Britain had supported and subsidized me for twenty years, and had made possible the stability of my reign by fending off potential enemies on my frontiers. Since Britain had seen me through difficult days, she is entitled now to request my assistance in the problem of Palestine where a strong Arab leader can restrain fanatical Arab elements, insist on moderation in Arab councils, and effect a realistic compromise with Zionism. Both sides must be prepared to make concessions and he looks to me to help prepare the Arab conces-

sions.

"I replied that, as he well knows, I have made no secret of my friendship and gratitude to Great Britain, a friend I have always been ready to help and I shall always help her and the Allies against their enemies. I told him, however, that what he proposes is not help to Britain or the Allies, but an act of treachery to the Prophet and all believing Muslims which would wipe out my honor and destroy my soul. I could not acquiesce in a compromise with Zionism much less take any initiative. Furthermore, I pointed out, that even in the preposterous event that I were willing to do so, it would not be a favor to Britain, since promotion of Zionism from any quarter must indubitably bring bloodshed, wide-spread disorder in the Arab lands, with certainly no benefit to Britain or anyone else. By this time Mr. Churchill had laid the big stick down.

"In turn I requested assurance that Jewish immigration to Palestine would be stopped. This Mr. Churchill refused to promise, though he assured me that he would oppose any plan of immigration which would drive the Arabs out of Palestine or deprive them of the means of livelihood there. I reminded him that the British and their Allies would be making their own choice between (1) a friendly and peaceful Arab world, and (2) a struggle to the death between Arab and Jew if unreasonable immigration of Jews to Palestine is renewed. In any case, the formula must be one arrived at by and with Arab consent."

However accurate the king's forecast may have been, it was destined to have little impact on events in Palestine because five months later Roosevelt was dead and Churchill had been voted out of office. It would be left to others to decide the fate of Palestine. If anything, the king's entreaties to Roosevelt on this subject had negative results for him, because the president's later comments about how much he had learned from the king stimulated influential American Zionists to redouble their efforts.

Neither the joint memorandum nor Eddy's 1954 account of the meeting, "F.D.R. Meets ibn Saud," contains any specific agreements or commitments by the United States or by Saudi Arabia, yet the impact of their afternoon together was far-reaching.

In the estimation of Colonel Eddy, who knew the Arabs probably better than any other American of his generation:

The Guardian of the Holy Places of Islam, and the nearest we have to a successor to the Caliphs, the Defender of the Muslim Faith and of the Holy Cities of three hundred million people, cemented a friendship with the head of a great Western and Christian nation. This meeting marks the high point of Muslim alliance with the West," he wrote. The people of the Near East, Eddy added, "have hoped and longed for a direct dealing with the U.S.A. without any intervention of a third party. The habits of the past which led us to regard North Africa and the Near East as preserves of Europe were broken at one blow by Mr. Roosevelt when he met the three kings in the Suez Canal in 1945.

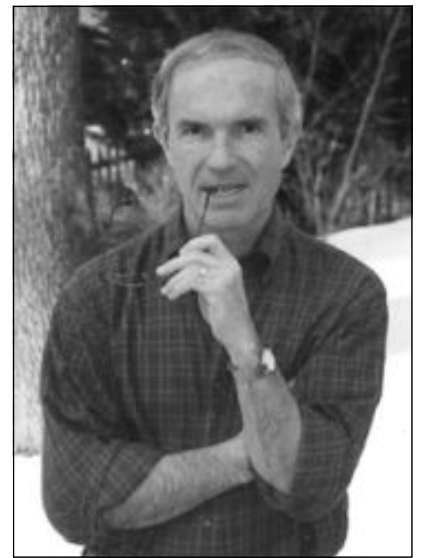
There were immediate practical results as well, beginning two weeks later when King Abdul Aziz declared war against the Axis powers. Roosevelt and Churchill had told him that doing so was the price of his country's admission to the new United Nations organization that was being formed, but it was not an easy decision for the king. According to H. St. John Philby, his longtime adviser and confidant, "Ibn Saud shrank from the unseemliness, not to say the absurdity, of declaring war on Powers already doomed, with whom his country had no quarrel. Yet in the end he yielded to the diplomatic pressure of his friends; and Saudi Arabia joined the ranks of the belligerent nations in name, if not in fact."

Over the next year or so, the king authorized Aramco to build an export pipeline from Dhahran to the Mediterranean coast to expedite delivery to European markets. He approved an arrangement by which the U.S. Air Force was allowed to operate the air base at Dhahran that the Americans had begun building during the war, and he accepted the deployment of a U.S. military team assigned to train young Saudis in airfield operations and maintenance. As soon as Congress authorized it in 1949, he accepted a full-fledged American military training program. Overcoming his longstanding suspicion of foreigners, he gave Trans World Airlines permission to land at Dhahran on flights from Cairo to Bombay.

And even though Roosevelt died shortly after the meeting, the course he had set of friendship with and assistance to Saudi Arabia continued under Truman. In 1946 the Export-Import Bank lent the Kingdom \$10 million for public works and water projects. The U.S. Geological Survey sent a team to look for water and mineral resources. The U.S. diplomatic mission in Jeddah was upgraded to full embassy status. In effect, the strategic and economic partnership that would bind the United States and Saudi Arabia for decades afterward took root and flourished in the aftermath of the landmark meeting of the two countries' leaders.

Roosevelt told his senior advisers after the meeting that Arabs and Jews were on a "collision course" toward war in Palestine and that he planned to meet with congressional leaders back in Washington to seek some new policy that would head it off. He did not succeed before his death two months later, but the strongly favorable impression he had made upon the king of Saudi Arabia limited the damage when that war did break out in 1948. Despite his anger at Truman, the king did not revoke the Aramco concession, terminate the U.S. air base agreement, or take any other action to retaliate against the United States. Under Roosevelt's spell he had cast his lot with the United States, and there it stayed. ▲

TOM LIPPMAN, former diplomatic correspondent and Middle East bureau chief for the Washington Post, is the author of the recently published "Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia." Other books include "Understanding Islam: An Introduction to the Muslim World," now in its third edition; "Egypt After Nasser: Sadat, Peace, and the Mirage of Prosperity; "Islam, Politics and Religion in the Muslim World," and "Madeleine Albright and the New American Diplomacy." He lives in Washington, DC.



About This Issue

First, a postscript: Following the death of President Roosevelt, his successor Harry Truman met with the U.S. ministers to Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the consul-general to mandated Palestine. Informed of his predecessor's agreement with the Saudi king on the question of Palestine, Truman reportedly said: "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism; I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents." The sole source for this candid, and oft-cited political assessment is Col. William Eddy's 1954 book **"F.D.R. Meets Ibn Saud,"** the same book on which much of this *Link* article is based. Long out of print, the book, along with its wonderful photographs, has recently been reprinted and is available through A.M.E.U.

Now, a post-postscript: In his feature article Tom Lippman writes that the Saudi king, when asked about giving Palestine to the persecuted Jews, replied that it was the Germans, not the Palestinians, who persecuted them, and that a part of Germany, not Palestine, should be set aside for a Jewish state. There's a cruel irony here because, truth be told, a part of Germany was confiscated from the Germans in 1945 by the American occupation force and given to the Jews. But it was not intended for a Jewish state on German soil. Rather, at the behest of the Zionist leaders, prime farm lands were confiscated from the Germans in order to teach Jews how to farm, so that, when they arrived in Palestine, they could farm the lands taken from the Palestinians. This little known fact, along with the role of Zionist organizations in pressuring Holocaust survivors to go to Palestine, is recounted in **"In the Shadow of the Holocaust,"** by Yosef Grodzinsky, Professor of Psychology at Tel Aviv University.

On the other side of the equation, Michael Fishbach documents what happened in Palestine from late 1947 through 1948 in his **"Records of Dispossession: Palestinian Refugee Property and the Arab-Israeli Conflict."** What happened is that over 726,000 Palestinians were uprooted from their homes. This represented more than half the total Palestinian population. Not surprisingly, especially in light of the Grodzinsky book, most of the Palestinian refugees were farmers, whose worldly goods—land, livestock, and crops—they were forced to leave behind. Based largely on archival records, Fishbach's research reveals for the first time how property changed hands, what it was worth, and how it was used by the fledgling Jewish state.

In July, 2000, 55 years after F.D.R. and Ibn Saud met,

President Bill Clinton met with Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak and the Palestinian President Yasser Arafat at Camp David for what was hoped to be a negotiated settlement of the 20th century's longest military occupation. Fearing he would be forced to concede to unacceptable terms, Arafat was reluctant to attend. Clinton, however, promised the Palestinian leader that, if the talks failed, he would not be held responsible. When the talks did fail, the promise given the Arabs was once again retracted, and all the blame was placed on Arafat. The story behind the story of Camp David is told by Clayton E. Swisher in **"The Truth About Camp David,"** a book which Middle East analyst William Quandt calls "a carefully researched account that challenges conventional interpretations of the Camp David summit."

That the offer presented to Arafat was anything but generous was examined in our December 2000 *Link* "A Most UnGenerous Offer" by Jeff Halper, founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. It proved one of our most popular issues, so popular that we are now down to our file copy. Jeff's organization, however, has reprinted the issue in an updated and greatly expanded booklet **"Obstacles to Peace,"** that contains 15 full-page color maps. If future peace talks offer the Palestinians nothing more than Camp David—and it could be less—the "state" they will be pressed to accept will once again consist of segmented regions, over whose air space, aquifers, and borders they will have no control.

Tom Lippman noted in his article that Ibn Saud genuinely liked FDR, because he felt the American president respected him and his culture. In the years following their historic encounter, hundreds of thousands of Americans have gone to Saudi Arabia, many to work there for lengthy periods of time. Saudi-American friendships were forged, friendships that often endured long after the Americans returned home. Ni'mah Ismail Nawwab is a Saudi poet, descended from a long line of Makkan scholars. She grew up in Dhahran, the headquarters of the Saudi Aramco Oil Company. We are pleased to carry her new collection of English poems, **"The Unfurling."** Here the poet speaks of customs long rooted in the desert sands and of the winds of change now sweeping over her land. Hers is a voice at times full of passion, and at all times full of respect for the customs of others. Qualities FDR and Ibn Saud would have appreciated.

All of the above works are available from our Book & Video catalog on pp. 14-16, or from our Website: www.ameu.org.

John F. Mahoney
Executive Director

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- ☐ Middle East Council of Churches, **Disabled for Palestine** (1993, VHS, 21 minutes) A doctor shows cases of Palestinians who have been maimed for life by Israeli bullets, beatings, and tear gas. **AMEU: \$10.00.**
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