

What Americans And Saudis Should Know About Each Other And The British Empire

by Hussein al-Nadeem

The following report may seem to be an anecdote from a time that has long passed. But, to miss the intellectual and historic lessons of this episode, as most Americans and Arabs have done, would have major strategic and political consequences for the present and the future. It has been extremely difficult for Americans and for Arabs, especially Saudis and Egyptians, to understand the reasons behind the recent slander and destabilization attacks launched by the leading American and British mass media against, specifically, the closest allies of the United States in the Arab world: Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Without understanding the background to the “empire vs. republic” faction fight in the United States and Western Europe, as *EIR* has been reporting (see for example Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “Are You Willing To Make The Change?” *EIR*, Nov. 30), citizens from both sides would resort to simplistic explanations for the Anglo-American slander campaign. This is partially done to avoid looking deeper into the nightmare engulfing the world today, because the implications of knowing that truth would ruin many fixed axioms and beliefs regarding who are one’s friends or enemies. However, we have to provide a historical precedent to our argument, to explain how this factional fight has determined the shape of politics in the Middle East in particular, and the world in general, since at least the end of World War II.

How Roosevelt Dealt With The British In The Middle East

What becomes obvious from reading the book written by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s son and personal aide, Elliott Roosevelt (*As He Saw It* [(New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946)], is that FDR was engaged in a war on two fronts: against the Nazi Hitler on the one hand, and Winston Churchill, representative of the British Empire, on the other. Elliott Roosevelt’s book is must reading for any world citizen who is interested in understanding how history was made or abused since World War II. Although this book does not deal much with the story we are reporting here, it is a powerful indicator of the “life and death fight” which was going on between FDR and Churchill around the form of the post-World War II world order.

Since the beginning of the 20th Century, U.S. leaders, especially those of an Anglophile leaning, such as Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, considered the Middle East as the British Empire’s sphere of interest. There, the British

had divided the region, which the defeated Ottomans left behind during World War I, into smaller entities, each fighting against the other with British weapons and mainly under the command of officers of the British Government of India. These political entities were created by the 1917 Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided the region between the British and the French, tearing up the promises of independence that had inspired the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans. Although these were nominally independent states, nonetheless all of them were considered as part of the “dominions” of His Majesty’s government.

This is one of the reasons why the founder of the Saudi kingdom, Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Saud, in his capacity as a head of state, never met any foreign head of state after the country’s creation in 1926 and its declared independence in 1936. This changed, when in February 1945, he met for the first time a Western head of state, who was also the greatest of the 20th Century, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Oil And The U.S. ‘National Interest’

There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia’s role as the world’s leading oil exporter has always been the focus of Western diplomacy toward the country. However, there are two different attitudes toward this “interest”: one is *colonial* and the other is a *partnership* between sovereign nation-states. U.S. interest in Saudi affairs had been minimal; but, with the discovery of large oil reserves in the Persian Gulf after World War I, American oil companies started to explore the chances for having a share in discovering and operating these oil reserves. The British and their oil company, the Iraq Petroleum Company, previously known as Anglo-Persian Oil Company and now as British Petroleum, had done their best to keep the Americans out of the Gulf. But by 1932, and after a fierce diplomatic fight with their British rivals, the California Arabian Standard Oil Co. (CASOC) managed to snatch a concession from Abdul Aziz with a lucrative contract.

The British, who were not interested in the production of more oil in the already stagnant oil market which they controlled, told Abdul Aziz that there was no oil beneath the desert. With the wisdom of an old Arab clan leader, he chose to deal with the Americans instead, who were willing to pay many times more than the British, and did not interfere in the internal affairs of the kingdom, as the British had always done.

CASOC prospectors did strike oil in well no. 7 in the



Under British “wraps,” Saudi Arabia’s King ibn Saud never met a Western head of state until he met the greatest of them, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, at Great Bitter Lake in Egypt in 1945. FDR’s policy was opposed to that of Churchill, and to that followed since his death.

Dammam Dome (a geological term used to describe the large oil basin under the surface in eastern Saudi Arabia), in March 1938, after five years of exploration. The first oil shipment was exported in May 1939, as World War II had just started. The oil discovered there, changed the nature of politics in the region and the world, to date. And relations between the Saudi kingdom and the United States were shaped by the activities of American oil companies there.

Little-Known Lend-Lease

When the United States joined the war, securing oil supplies took an important position in FDR’s diplomacy in the Middle East. Roosevelt’s Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, Petroleum Coordinator for National Defense since May 1941, played a key role. The State Department noted in a December 1942 memorandum, that “the development of Saudi Arabian petroleum resources should be viewed in the light of a broad national interest.” And in February 1943, Roosevelt issued an Executive Order declaring Saudi Arabia eligible for Lend-Lease assistance. This resulted in an unprecedented flow of cash and goods to the kingdom: three times more than the annual £3 million the Saudi King was getting from Britain.

Many historians consider this an opportunistic move by the United States to use British imperial methods to control world affairs after the war. This might not have been the case, if Roosevelt had survived World War II. A closer look at his views on what the nature of international relations should be

after the war, proves the fallacy of this cynical, Hobbesian evaluation of human affairs.

Roosevelt’s generosity toward the Saudi kingdom enraged the British government, and they started putting demands on the financial policies of the government of Abdul Aziz. He acted in deference to the British. According to historian Robert Lacey, when the American chargé d’affaires in Jeddah, James Moose, heard of this, he was outraged. “It seemed to him to confirm two of Washington’s darkest suspicions about their British allies in Arabia: that Britain had been stealing all the credit for providing the Saudis with aid, which would never have been possible without America’s generous Lend-Lease assistance to London; and, worse still, that the British were planning to use the leverage this aid gave them to demand a quid pro quo from the Saudis and to ‘horn in,’ as Roosevelt put it, ‘on Saudi Arabian oil reserves,’ ” says Lacey.

Moose was, reportedly, a faithful interpreter of Roosevelt’s policy that Britain should not exploit American war aid to re-establish her empire once hostilities had ended. Moose and the Near East division in the State Department became convinced that the British and their ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Stanley Jordan, were “working to undermine the American position in Saudi Arabia, and in 1944 Washington lodged a formal protest with Whitehall [the British government] at the behavior of His Majesty’s Minister in Jeddah.”

Roosevelt’s vision for the post-War world, expressed in his various clashes with Winston Churchill, included a huge \$57 million postwar Saudi aid package for infrastructure development projects. Contrary to Lacey and many other modern historians, this was not “neo-colonialism” replacing old-fashioned imperialism.

To understand this, one has to listen carefully to what Roosevelt told Churchill in March 1941, even before the United States had entered the war. We quote here from a conversation reported by Elliott Roosevelt:

Father started it.

“Of course, after the war, one of the preconditions of any lasting peace will have to be the greatest possible freedom of trade. . . . No artificial barriers. As few favored economic agreements as possible, opportunities for expansion. . . .”

Churchill shifted in his armchair. “The British Empire trade agreements,” he began heavily, “are —”

Father broke in. "Yes. Those Empire trade agreements are a case in point. It's because of them that the people of India and Africa, of all the colonial Near East and Far East, are still as backward as they are."

Churchill's neck reddened and he crouched forward. "Mr. President, England does not propose for a moment to lose its favored positioning among the British Dominions. The trade that has made England great shall continue, and under conditions prescribed by England's ministers."

"You see," said Father slowly, "it is along in here somewhere that there is likely to be some disagreement between you, Winston, and me. I am firmly of the belief that if we are to arrive at a stable peace it must involve the development of backward countries. How can this be done? It can't be done by eighteenth-century methods. Now—"

"Who is talking eighteenth-century methods?"

"Whichever of your ministers recommends a policy which takes wealth in raw materials out of a colonial country, but which returns nothing to the people of that country in consideration. *Twentieth-century* methods involve bringing industry to these colonies. *Twentieth-century* methods include increasing the wealth of a people by increasing their standard of living, by educating them, by bringing them sanitation—by making sure that they get a return for the raw wealth of their community."

. . . The P.M. was beginning to look apoplectic.

"You mentioned India," he growled.

"Yes, I can't believe that we can fight a war against fascist slavery, and at the same time not work to free people all over the world from backward colonial policy. . . . The peace cannot include any continued despotism. The structure of the peace demands and will get equality of peoples."

In 1945, Roosevelt discreetly laid plans to meet with Abdul Aziz after the Yalta Conference of February 1945. The President had William Eddy, U.S. Ambassador to Jeddah, make the arrangement secretly with Abdul Aziz, so that no one, especially not the British, should find out. Only on the last night of the Yalta Conference, did Roosevelt casually let Churchill know that he was meeting "the King of Arabia" in a few days' time. According to Eddy, the British Prime Minister was thunderstruck and "burned up the wires to all his diplomats, trying to arrange a meeting of his own with Abdul Aziz." But he could meet Abdul Aziz only after the latter's meeting with FDR. Abdul Aziz and his entourage left Jeddah Port on Feb. 12 on the American warship *Murphy*, and immediately felt at home in the company of the Western "infidels." The meeting between Roosevelt and Abdul Aziz was set to take place in the Great Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal in Egypt on Feb. 14.

Roosevelt's Plans To Solve The Palestinian-Jewish Conflict

As soon as the two leaders met, Roosevelt embarked on a discussion of the conflict going on in Palestine, not oil concessions. Jewish settlers were fighting against Arab locals over land, and both of them were waging guerrilla warfare against the British. Roosevelt deeply believed that the British, as in almost every other case, were mishandling the question, and Jewish lobbies in the United States were mobilizing for a Jewish state in Palestine, turning it into a major domestic political issue. Roosevelt wanted to take personal responsibility for solving the issue.

Since 1917, when the British occupied Palestine, they had played a double game. While promising the Jews of Europe a homeland in Palestine through the Balfour Declaration, they also promised the Arabs an independent Pan-Arab state in the Middle East through the al-Sherif Hussein-McMahon correspondence. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, British officers were training and arming Jewish terrorist gangs who were terrorizing Arab villagers to leave their homes. They also allowed the illegal immigration of tens of thousands of Jews from Europe. During World War II, the situation reached a deadlock, and war of all against all was waged in the British-mandated Palestine. King Abdul Aziz was involved in financing and arming some of the Palestinians who were fighting the Jewish groups and the British colonial army.

President Roosevelt, welcoming King Abdul Aziz on board the *USS Quincy*, wanted to enlist the Saudi King's help with the problem of Palestine, according to Lacey. The Jews of Europe had suffered terribly at Hitler's hands, the President said, and Roosevelt had committed himself to find a solution to their suffering. Abdul Aziz recognized the suffering of the Jews in Europe, but could not understand why their suffering should be relieved at the expense of the Arabs, and why Arabs should pay for the barbarity of the Europeans.

This is the key point of difference in understanding between Arabs and Westerners on the question of Arab-Israeli conflict to this day. For 14 centuries, Arabs and Muslims were not hostile to Jews settling in the Muslim world. The hostility started with the British occupation of Palestine. Since the 1930s—but never before that—the word "Jew" in the eyes of Palestinians and neighboring Arab nations became associated with armed terrorist gangs. Therefore, most Palestinians today would say "Jews" instead of "Israelis," and this is manipulated in the Western mass media to describe Arabs as "anti-Semites," when the Arabs themselves are the Semitic cousins of the Jews, according to the Islamic and Abrahamite tradition. On the contrary, the Jews of Spain sought refuge in Muslim North Africa, to be protected from the anti-Semitism of the Europeans.

With the spontaneous logic of an old Arab Bedouin leader, King Abdul Aziz told Roosevelt: "Give them [the Jews] and their descendants the choicest lands and homes of the Germans who oppressed them." This was not what the President

had in mind at all. The Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, Roosevelt explained, had an understandable dread of remaining in Germany where they might suffer again, and they also had “a sentimental desire” to settle in Palestine. King Abdul Aziz had a difficult time understanding what the Americans and the British had to fear from the Nazis whom they were planning to defeat totally. He later proposed that the Jews should be divided and be given sanctuary among the victorious nations, as the Arab tribes would do with the victims of a defeated enemy.

Roosevelt was impressed by the King’s firmness, and realized that the question was more complex than was generally believed in the United States and England. Therefore, he promised Abdul Aziz that he would not take any drastic steps before consulting with the Arab leaders (see box). He also encouraged a plan which Abdul Aziz had suggested, to send a mission to the West to explain the Arab viewpoint. The President stated that this was a very good idea, because he thought many people in America and England were “misinformed.” He even proposed to hold an international conference on the question, gathering Arab and Jewish leaders.

Speaking to Congress on his return, Roosevelt declared that “from [Abdul Aziz] ibn Saud, of Arabia, I learned more of the whole problem of the Muslims and more about the Jewish problem in five minutes than I could have learned by exchange of dozen letters.” Abdul Aziz said his farewell

to the American President, well pleased. The next week, he was going to meet Churchill on Lake Karoun in Egypt. Abdul Aziz asked Roosevelt, as he was greeting him on the *Quincy*, whether the President minded his meeting with the British Prime Minister. FDR replied ironically: “Why not? I always enjoy seeing Mr. Churchill and I am sure you’ll like him too.”

This was not true, and Abdul Aziz did not like Winston Churchill very much, as it turned out. The contrast in warmth and generosity between Roosevelt and Churchill was enormous, as he discovered. FDR had gone to considerable pains not to offend the King’s Islamic sensibilities. As the two men were descending to luncheon in separate lifts on board the *Quincy*, Roosevelt, who used to smoke heavily, had reached out and pressed the emergency button. Suspended in the lift, he had smoked two cigarettes rapidly before joining Abdul Aziz at the luncheon table, where no alcohol or tobacco was being served. Churchill, on the other hand, made a little speech to the effect that, while he realized “it was the religion of His Majesty to deprive himself of smoking and alcohol, I must point out that my rule of life prescribes as an absolutely sacred rite smoking cigars and also the drinking of alcohol before, after, and, if need be, during all meals, and in the intervals between them,” and proceeded to sip whisky and puff his cigars through much of his three-hour meeting with the Saudi King.

Letter From FDR To King Ibn Saud, April 5, 1945

His Majesty Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdur Rahman al-Faisal al-Saud, King of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh

Great and Good Friend:

I have received the communication which Your Majesty sent me under date of March 10, 1945, in which you refer to the question of Palestine and to the continuing interest of the Arabs in current developments affecting that country.

I am gratified that Your Majesty took this occasion to bring your views on this question to my attention, and I have given the most careful attention to the statements which you make in your letter. I am also mindful of the memorable conversation which we had not so long ago, and in the course of which I had an opportunity to obtain so vivid an impression of Your Majesty’s sentiments on this question.

Your Majesty will recall that on previous occasions I

communicated to you the attitude of the American Government toward Palestine, and made clear our desire that no decision be taken with respect to the basic situation in that country without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews. Your Majesty will also doubtless recall that during our recent conversation I assured you that I would take no action, in my capacity as Chief of the Executive Branch of this Government, which might prove hostile to the Arab people.

It gives me pleasure to renew to Your Majesty the assurances which you have previously received regarding the attitude of my Government and my own, as Chief Executive, with regard to the question of Palestine, and to inform you that the policy of this Government in this respect is unchanged.

I desire also at this time to send you my best wishes for Your Majesty’s continued good health and for the welfare of your people.

Your Good Friend,
Franklin D. Roosevelt

Source: Department of State Bulletin of Oct. 21, 1945, p. 623, printed in *A Decade of American Foreign Policy: Basic Documents, 1941-49*.

Sabotage Of FDR's Peace Initiative

Adding injury to insult, Churchill opposed everything Abdul Aziz had discussed with FDR on the question of Palestine. Churchill, who had turned the Middle East into the mess it has been, largely because of his plans presented in the Cairo Conference in 1921, had no intention of solving this question. Rather, he provoked the Saudi King to take a more hard-line position against a peaceful settlement with the Jews. This is a typical British *modus operandi* for provoking Arabs into taking positions, which are against their own interest. In 1973, Henry Kissinger used the same methods to force Saudi Arabia's King Faisal to turn his warnings of an oil embargo into actions—all due to the provocation and manipulations of Kissinger.

As Abdul Aziz later told U.S. Ambassador Eddy, "Mr. Churchill opened the subject confidently wielding the big stick." He added that Churchill had told him that "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 and effect a realistic compromise with Zionism." A realistic compromise would have been possible, if the "big stick" methods were not used, and if FDR had not been betrayed by his successors.

FDR died on April 12, 1945, one week after writing his last letter to Abdul Aziz, on April 5. Before his body was buried, the new chief executive of the U.S. government, Harry Truman, reneged on every promise Roosevelt had made to world leaders concerning reshaping the world after the war. Truman threw the Middle East and the Palestinian question back into the court of the British, supporting immigration of a hundred thousand European Jews to Palestine, in cooperation with the British, and without any prior arrangement with Arabs. In the Autumn of 1945, shortly after Roosevelt's death, Truman reportedly summoned to Washington the U.S. Chiefs of Mission to Saudi Arabia and the other Arab countries, to hear their report on the fear and anger being aroused in the Arab world by the favor that the new President was showing to Zionist ambitions. What moved Truman was probably not any deep understanding of Zionism, but an opportunistic electioneering tactic, a stupid method of buying votes at the expense of world peace. Truman told his diplomats at the end of the meeting, "I am 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."

King Abdul Aziz realized that the promise Roosevelt made had died with him. And the relationship between Arabs and the United States has ever since become a mixture of love and hatred, where the British intervene every now and then in the guise of the "honest broker."

In 1947, the British decided to evacuate Palestine, leaving



Churchill insisted on drinking and smoking cigars "before, after, and, if necessary, during meals" with King Ibn Saud; the intentional insult was the epitome of British policy.

behind a well-ordered chaos. The British threw the issue into the lap of the United Nations, which issued the Partition Resolution for the creation of two states in Palestine, one Jewish, and the other for Arabs. The Arab governments, still largely controlled by the British, rejected the Partition plan. When the last British troops withdrew, the state of Israel was declared on May 14, 1948. It was immediately recognized by the Truman Administration, and the first Arab-Israeli war became a fact.

The conflict, which continues to this day, was possible to solve peacefully already 50 years ago, by 20th-Century methods of the American republican political tradition. Unfortunately, Roosevelt died, and the Anglo-American alliance, based on the power of the financial institutions and the alliance of major British and American oil companies, ran most of the affairs of this planet after World War II. Arab-American relations, especially those of Saudi Arabia with the United States, have been shaped by the oil and financial interests of the Anglo-American oligarchy.

The real tragedy is not what has been done in the past, but rather that it should be perpetuated, as long as American and Arab citizens continue to be ignorant about the real American intellectual tradition, as American statesman Lyndon LaRouche has so often defined it in this publication. It was this tradition which Roosevelt represented, and so enthusiastically fought for, in order to eliminate the centuries-long bestial colonial system of the British and other empires. In order to know their enemies and their friends, nations have to proceed from what defines human relations and interests, in order to promote the common good of all nations. They also have to find what political traditions represent them, and they have to fight for them. And there is no better time than this moment in history to do that.