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## ORIGINS OF US SECURITY ASSISTANCE IN ARABIA

By

LT COL SAMUEL D. MCCORMICK, USAF

How did US policy planners view the Arabian Peninsula at the close of the Second World War? Your question assumes we viewed it at all.

-former Director, Near East/Africa  
US Department of State

The degree to which the Middle East dominates the news headlines today is far removed from the halting approach to involvement the United States displayed toward the region at the close of the Second World War. Today, even for USAF personnel involved in planning, managing and implementing US security assistance programs in the area, the record of the origins and evolution of US security assistance policy toward the Arabian Peninsula is often remote and fading rapidly. An occasional review of the ways in which the programs originated and evolved and the policy formulation process which prompted our involvement places our present activities in the Arabian Peninsula in better perspective.

This study is concerned specifically with the beginning of the US security assistance relationship with Saudi Arabia, in which the US Air Force played an important role. The period 1948 - 1950 provides a microcosm of the US security and diplomatic policy formulation process. Recently declassified cables, memoranda, and other correspondence allow a close look at a fascinating, often frustrating policy evolution. The events of the period reflect US initiative into a region toward which the United States had no firmly defined foreign policy at all prior to World War II. The period points to the present in that the US found itself with a growing awareness of interests and even greater responsibilities at a time when domestic and economic pressures meant reduced financial resources with which to meet those responsibilities.

The actors in the political and policy arenas of the day are familiar names to today's professionals and surely rank as some of the key decision-makers of the Twentieth century. On the US team, there was plain spoken, yet dynamic, astute President Harry S. Truman; for Saudi Arabia, King Abd Al Aziz Ibn Saud (in the West often called Ibn Saud), who, through force of personality, unified the majority of the Arabian Peninsula into a country which bears his family's name. President Truman once remarked privately that he considered Ibn Saud to be the greatest of all Middle East heads of state. In spite of great dissatisfaction with US postwar policy toward Palestine, Ibn Saud had the vision to see a commonality of US-Saudi interests and the courage not to be dissuaded from the course of friendship with the United States by intraregional criticism of his actions. US Secretaries of State George C. Marshall and Dean Acheson, Prince (later King) Faisal Ibn

Abd Al Aziz, US Secretaries of Defense James Forrestal and Louis Johnson, and US Ambassador J. Rives Childs were other key actors. On the USAF team were Generals Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Lawrence Kuter, and Richard O'Keefe.

US security assistance programs to foreign nations originated in 1935 congressional legislation that formalized the arms transfer process. "Lend-lease" during the Second World War had provided for the supply of arms to US allies threatened by aggression, where that aggression also threatened US interests. Following World War II, the strategy of containment and the Truman Doctrine (1947) promoted both security and economic assistance to US allies facing either internal subversion or the threat of external aggression. The initial policy guidance and legislation was specifically applied to Greece and Turkey, thus implicitly excluding security assistance to regions such as the Arabian Peninsula.

The United States lacked a formal policy toward Arabia and the Middle East before World War II largely because it had no perceived overriding interests in the region and Britain had been the traditional arbiter of regional security. Thus, US planners gave little consideration to establishing a security assistance relationship in the region. The Second World War had an irrevocable impact on this assessment, for both the strategic position and the importance of oil resources of the Arabian Peninsula became apparent. In 1946 the United States built and the US Air Force began operating the air base at Dhahran and initiated a small aviation training program to train Saudis to eventually operate the airfield. Access to the Dhahran air base was made possible by a growing US-Saudi "special relationship" that had its origins in coincident economic interests dating from the 1930s and its actual genesis in the February 1945 meeting between King Abd Al Aziz Ibn Saud and US President Franklin Roosevelt.

Counterbalancing and often confusing the diplomatic special relationship after November 1947 was a problem that haunts our policy efforts to this day -- the conflict for Palestine. The partition of Palestine and the ensuing conflict greatly overshadowed other US concerns in the region and prompted a US arms embargo of the region. Many US policy planners apparently felt, however, that the conflict over Palestine was a temporary problem and the solution would be forthcoming in a matter of months or very few years.

By January 1948, strains over the problem of Palestine and US support for the partition were beginning to adversely affect fledgling US-Saudi relations. J. Rives Childs, head of the US legation in Saudi Arabia, cabled Secretary of State George C. Marshall on 13 January that "until Palestine Partition we have not had a firmer friend in the Arab world than Ibn Saud." Childs further expressed his concern that the King "may be influenced to abandon hopes of close political relations with US," returning instead to closer security ties with Great Britain. Childs also reported Prince (later King) Faisal's deep dissatisfaction over the US position on Palestine. Faisal later stated that had he had authority over the kingdom's foreign policy he would have broken relations with the United States at that time. Faisal was dissatisfied too with apparent US reluctance to raise the US diplomatic mission in the Kingdom from legation to embassy status, and with US hesitancy to provide security assistance to the kingdom.[1]

While Palestine dominated US concern in the region, there were other important issues in the Saudi Arabian and Arabian Peninsula security milieu. Certainly one such issue in the mind of the Saudi monarch was his relationship to the Hashemites on his northern border.\* The continuing mistrust combined with traditional British presence on the Arabian Peninsula and British military assistance to the Hashemites (most tangibly reflected in the Arab Legion of Jordan, under General Sir John Glubb - "Glubb Pasha") led to Ibn Saud's concerns about combined Anglo-Hashemite machinations at the expense of Saudi Arabia. His concern became a motivation for closer security ties with the United States.

The position of the Saudi monarch was always clear: he wanted US military assistance to train a modern army that would meet the challenge of postwar regional instability. He also considered establishing a bilateral security relationship with the United States, or even a trilateral relationship that also included Great Britain. In December 1947 the king requested a US military mission. In doing so, he noted that the United States should provide arms and other equipment and the training of Saudi armed forces personnel. The United States, for its part, although eager to retain access to the facilities at Dhahran air base and conscious of the economic benefit accruing from the US-owned Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO), was cautious of any expanded involvement in the region, both because the Arabian Peninsula was an area of traditional British influence and by an awareness of limited committable US military and security assets in the postwar environment.

In response to expressions of concern by Ibn Saud, Childs did, in January 1948, reaffirm US support for the independence and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia, though Prince Faisal replied that something more concrete than assurances was desired, namely, US security assistance in the form "of the military requirements essential to defending Saudi sovereignty and maintaining internal stability." [2]

In January 1948, a draft of a proposed Saudi-Anglo treaty reached the State Department. The text of the draft provided Great Britain with certain unspecified strategic installations in Saudi Arabia. This caused something of a stir in the State Department and an internal memo from the director, Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs to the secretary of state, cited US interests in Saudi Arabia, including ARAMCO and the Dhahran air base, and noted "It is now obvious . . . a training mission or material, or both, will have to be provided Saudi Arabia if our position there is to be maintained." [3] The memo went on to recommend that the secretary of defense consolidate his departments views on the subject of concrete military assistance to Saudi Arabia.

Despite the urgency of the aforementioned memo, the secretary of state cabled Childs on 6 February 1948 that the US arms embargo to the Middle East and other considerations made large-scale US security assistance to Saudi Arabia unlikely for the moment. The United States would, he noted, support a United Kingdom-Saudi Arabian security relationship providing it did not

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\* Sons of the Hashemite family of Hussein ruled both Jordan and Iraq in 1948. The family had been displaced from what is today western Saudi Arabia by Ibn Saud's forces in the 1920s.

adversely affect the Dhahran agreement or further development of US-Saudi Arabian political, military, and economic relations. What he did suggest for the moment was a US military study of possible US actions to enhance oil field, pipeline, and air base defense.

The Director, Near East/Africa, in a later memo to Secretary of State Marshall did note that US refusal to provide security assistance to Saudi Arabia should be looked upon as a temporary US position which would be reexamined along with other diplomatic and strategic interests in the region when the issue of Palestine was settled.

King Abd Al Aziz Ibn Saud ultimately rejected the Anglo alliance and so informed Childs on 21 February 1948, simultaneously expressing his continued concern over potential British-Hashemite adventures in Arabia. The King found himself in an increasingly uncomfortable position: there was, he felt, little acceptable alternative to US assistance to secure Saudi Arabia against external aggression, but he was under increasingly heavy criticism by other regional states for too-close relations with the US -- in light of US policy toward Palestine -- and he had to endure this dilemma without a tangible US commitment to his security.

In late 1948, Major General Lawrence Kuter, one of the USAF's great airpower theorists and new commander of the Military Air Transport Service (MATs), met with Ibn Saud to discuss the small aviation training mission and Dhahran air base access rights, the latter being of continuing interest to the USAF. Ibn Saud again expressed his disappointment at the lack of a formal US commitment to Saudi Arabian security and restated his request for assistance in the form of both arms and training to improve the force capabilities of the Saudi armed forces. General Kuter's predecessor at MATs, on a similar mission the preceding April, had also encountered Ibn Saud's forceful arguments. Upon learning that about all either the United States or the US Air Force had to offer was a small increase in the size of the Dhahran aviation training mission, Ibn Saud had replied, "Is that all? . . . Truly and actually I never believed US Government would give this kind of reply to my request for aid . . . offer is satisfactory for a time of civilization and peace but it is not for today . . . do something concrete now or tell us that you will do nothing." [4]

The Department of Defense, under Secretary of Defense James Forrestal and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) were working the difficult postwar task of outlining US commitments, strategies and goals for the region. The initial feeling, expressed in an August 1948 JCS memo to Forrestal, concluded that US and British strategic interests in the area were generally complementary and often congruent. These were listed as:

1. Peace and stability
2. Free access to and transit through and over the entire area
3. The development of oil resources together with the facilities necessary for such development
4. Preservation of the integrity of the entire area from foreign unfriendly influence and domination, and
5. Uses of bases in the area in the event of major war. [5]

The JCS memo noted that US interests in the region involved a larger vision of US global strategy, embodied in the containment of communism, though a clear definition of specific US security needs was difficult. Forrestal did mention to Marshall in a November 1948 letter that providing the means to defend and conduct sustained operations from Dhahran might well enhance the US strategic position in the event of war, and the first, best step to achieve this goal would be to expand the US training mission.

Marshall enquired as to whether defense leaders and planners were prepared to support the transfer of weapons and other equipment to Saudi Arabia once the arms embargo was lifted. He noted Ibn Saud's repeated requests for such assistance. But in December 1948 he cabled Childs that Air Force and other military strategy planners in Washington had not fully defined the commitments which the nation might have to support, nor did they know fully where the money was coming from and how much of it there might be to support defense programs. The State Department, Marshall noted, was in almost daily contact with the Air Force, but uncertainty over strategic goals, assets and commitments was translated into indecision. Since months might pass before answers were forthcoming, he recommended that Childs simply reiterate to the king the importance of the assistance already in place at Dhahran. He asked Childs to forward any specific requests for assistance by Ibn Saud to Washington for consideration by the National Military Establishment.

Secretary Marshall asked for a JCS representative actively to assist with further planning on the subject of security assistance to Saudi Arabia. General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, USAF Chief of Staff, was so designated by the Secretary of Defense.

The year 1948 closed with no agreement on security assistance to Saudi Arabia, but in a positive aside, which Childs reported to Washington, Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Yusuf Yassin recalled the Saudi Government's general pleasure at the Air Forces' professional approach to operation of the small program in Dhahran and at the mission's treatment of Saudi students in Dhahran. He made special mention of the lack of discrimination and stated his hope that their actions would serve as a role model for future ARAMCO policies.

In 1949, the United States upgraded its diplomatic mission in Saudi Arabia from legation to embassy and appointed J. Rives Childs as first US Ambassador to the Kingdom. Palestine continued as the focus of regional tension which made a long-term agreement on US access to Dhahran difficult. Ibn Saud became concerned over the rumored intentions of his northern neighbors and asked whether the US arms embargo would be of sufficient duration to preclude Saudi Arabia from arming itself against external threats.

In answering Ibn Saud's concerns about regional threats, new US Secretary of State Dean Acheson instructed Childs to inform Ibn Saud that the United States would act (with Britain) in the event of any threat to peace and security in the region. However, he cautioned Childs to remind the king that preserving the peace was fundamentally the responsibility of Arab statesmen.

In the same month, Forrestal stated that definition of the nature of a security assistance relationship would have to wait:

In view of uncertainties as to the duration of the current arms embargo, any definitive answer to this question should be postponed until such embargo has been lifted. At that time, the National Military Establishment will be glad to reexamine the matter in the light of equipment and funds then available, and in the light of priorities which may be established by the Department of State for aid to nations of the Near and Middle East.[6]

Forrestal indicated that the Joint Chiefs would be willing to expand both the size and the scope of the training mission in Saudi Arabia to include air base defense as well as operation of the airfield. This action, the Joint Chiefs felt, would complement both US strategic objectives and the security requirements of Saudi Arabia. These recommendations were subject to budgetary limitations, of course.

Childs, recently promoted to Ambassador, was instructed to present this information carefully to the king, taking a broad and explanatory approach to the US view of its security commitments, and not being overly optimistic about the prospect of an immediate change in US policy on security assistance until the removal of the arms embargo.

The immediate Saudi response to the information Childs presented was one of disappointment in continuing US hesitance on Saudi requests for assistance. The foreign minister later noted that the United States "either has no confidence in us or has not yet considered the great fundamental mutual interests." [7] Childs cabled Ibn Saud's comments,

There was time when . . . [Saudi Arabia] could rely on splendid fighting qualities of Saudi soldiers to defend itself. New modern weapons now meant SA defenseless against tanks and military aircraft. These in possession of/or available to his enemies while he possessed none.[8]

Childs noted the king's repeated requests to the US Government for assistance which had not resulted in satisfaction. The king was now approaching the United States for the last time. Childs informed Washington by cable and letter,

We cannot continue to give the King the brush off indefinitely.[9]

The Department will appreciate that one of my principal preoccupations over the past 18 months has been conjuring up fresh excuses and explanations as to why we were unable to respond to the King's overtures for closer political relations. I have reached practically the limit of my resources and the fact that His Majesty emphasized in his audience with me on 10 May that he was approaching us for the last time on this subject indicates that he has just about reached the limit of his patience. To use a colloquial expression, "We must make up our minds to fish or cut bait.[10]

Childs suggested to Washington that the security interests of the Kingdom were not mutually exclusive with those of the United States and that Ibn Saud's desires for a closer political relationship with the United States supported US strategic interests. This was true from the economic perspective and from the perspective of access to strategic military facilities, such as those at Dhahran.

In late May 1949, Ambassador Childs was able to provide Ibn Saud with an extensive aide-memoire that gave some positive indications on the possibility for US military assistance to Saudi Arabia, based on information from Washington.

The Truman administration had considerable hope that new military assistance legislation under consideration by the Congress would enable the United States to extend arms and equipment on a reimbursable basis to its friends and allies, whose enhanced defensive capabilities against outside aggression would also meet US national interests. This provision might at last enable the Truman administration to demonstrate tangibly its support for Saudi security by the relatively modest transfer of arms and training assistance that had been so long requested. Unfortunately, this provision was deleted from legislation finally passed and signed into law on 6 October 1949.

In mid-November 1949, the King, still unaware of the legislative deletion, again stressed to Ambassador Childs the congruence of US and Saudi interests. He remained very mistrustful of the British and of those regional states receiving British military assistance. He reviewed for Ambassador Childs the perception of nation's encirclement by the Hashemites and other British-backed states, including Jordan, Iraq, Yemen and the Persian Gulf shaikhdoms. Childs also forwarded to Washington Ibn Saud's concerns about stated British intent to retain the full weight of its influence in the Gulf, despite its recent decision to withdraw from India.[11]

Ambassador Childs sought to assure Ibn Saud on US support for his security concerns. The King replied that should his country be invaded, the United States would simply refer the matter to the United Nations, which would be no more able to halt the aggression than it was able to ensure Jewish compliance with the UN decisions in Palestine. Later in the same interview, the King remarked -- lightly, it is said, but undoubtedly with genuine concern: "I will be utterly frank with you. US does not care for Ibn Saud but only for the oil of Saudi Arabia." [12]

Ambassador Childs later presented a note to the Foreign Minister for the King's review which attempted to answer explicitly the king's concern in greater detail, noting that the US Government had taken the matter of the King's concern about encirclement up with the British Government. The British Government repeated assurances that it would use its influence to prevent the use of force in the region. The United States, Childs noted, "will continue to make clear to Arab states concerned that it would be contrary to policy of US . . . for any state to take aggressive measures against another." [13] The Saudi response to Childs was that they would await concrete evidence of US support, but that US assurances were appreciated.

On 1 February 1950, Ambassador Childs cabled Acheson that "there is no more important problem in US relations with Saudi Arabian Government than

this question military aid . . . Department will no doubt realize my position here will be practicably untenable unless I can furnish King with concrete evidence of what we intend to do to help him and time about past when promises re our future intentions will carry much weight with him . . . I realize delicate question on Military Assistance Program to Saudi Arabian Government in light Israel but I feel strongly we should approach question not from point of view aid to an Arab country but aid for country which is helping us out and is extremely important to US strategically. Aid should be viewed not as aid to Arabs but as aid to US interests." [14]

Secretary of State Acheson replied that he was readdressing the issue of legislative authorization for military assistance to Saudi Arabia, though congressional approval could not be predicted. In the interim the department was willing to provide informal guidance to the government of Saudi Arabia on the acquisition of military and nonmilitary equipment from commercial sources.

The latter route was not necessary. Congress acted to amend the Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949; this amendment was signed into law by President Truman on 26 July 1950. The amendment permitted US security assistance in the form of military equipment and training to nations whose defense was determined to figure into the security interests of the United States, provided such assistance was carried out at no expense to the US government. This supported both the strategy of containment, which promoted economic and military assistance to US friends and allies as one of its tenets, and the Truman Doctrine, which was that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free people who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressure." Saudi Arabia was declared eligible by the Department of Defense under the justification that the ability of Saudi Arabia to defend itself was clearly important to US security. [15]

The United States Military Training Mission (USMTM) to Saudi Arabia was formally established in 1953, to administer the approved assistance and to assist and advise the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Defense on such matters as organization, training, plans and other related functions.

The US-Saudi security assistance relationship embodied in the USMTM, and in other in-kingdom US Department of Defense programs such as the Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program and the construction programs of the US Army Corps of Engineers Middle East Division, has successfully weathered over 30 years of regional tension and five additional Arab-Israeli conflicts. It has survived and even grown through several fundamental changes in US presidential doctrine, congressional security assistance legislation, and executive arms transfer policies. In the process, Saudi Arabia has emerged as an important factor in US security policy toward Southwest Asia and a critical diplomatic actor in promoting regional stability.

In the face of years of regional conflict and instability in the Middle East, the United States Military Training Mission has been a source of constancy in US-Saudi relations, occasionally bridging the gap and maintaining lines of communication when diplomatic dialogue became strained. It will continue to play a key role in US-Saudi relations as visible evidence of US commitment to Saudi Arabian security against external aggression.

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Lieutenant Colonel Sam McCormick was assigned as a Research Fellow at the Air University Center for Aerospace Doctrine Research and Education (AU CADRE), and a student at the Air War College, when he wrote this article. Currently he is assigned to the US Central Command, MacDill AFB FL.